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KILLER NASHVILLE REVIEW ON BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 5

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TWENTY-ONE NEW TALES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR



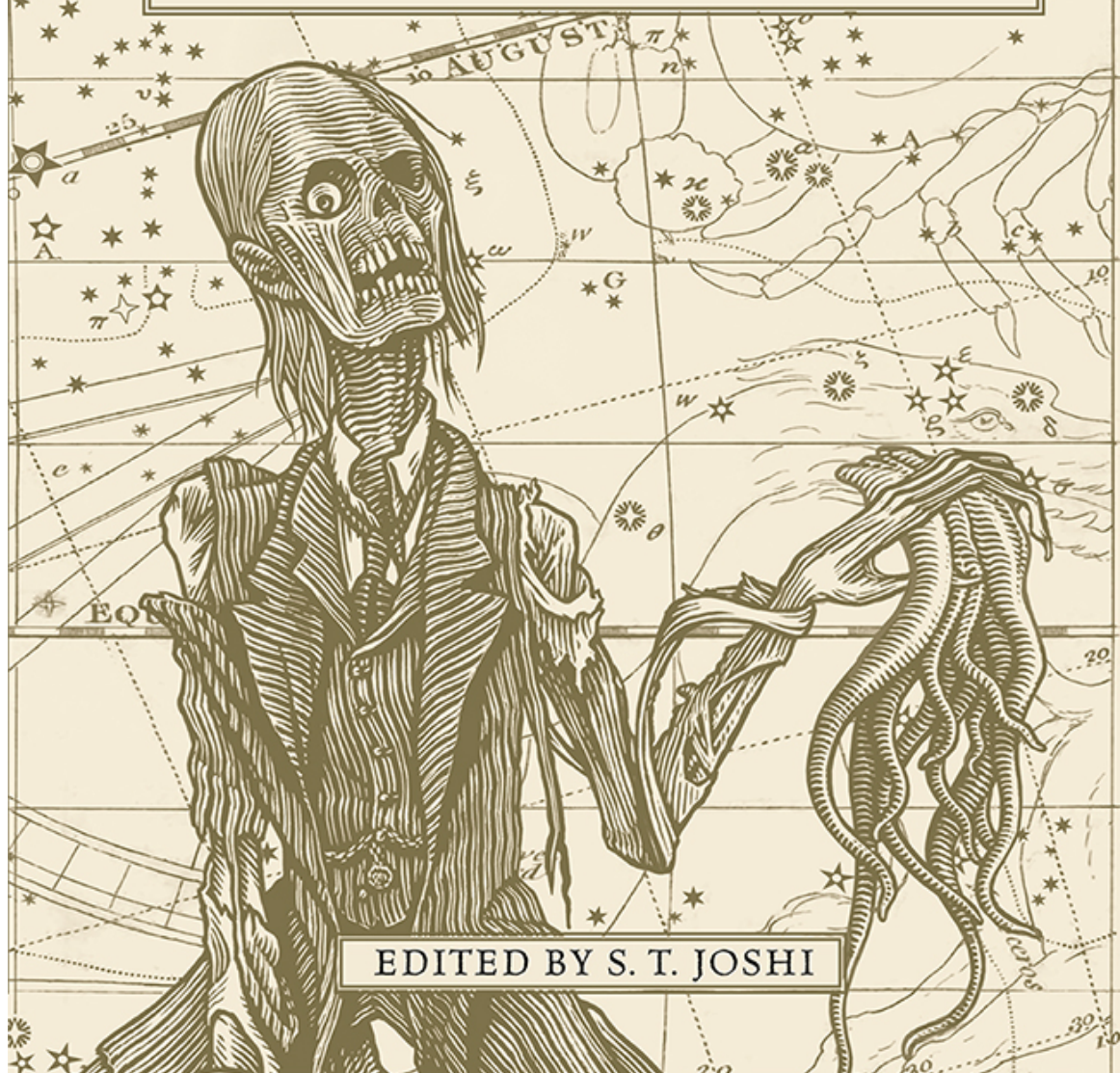
EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

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BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 6

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BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 6

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“The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.”

H. P. LOVECRAFT,

“SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE”

Introduction



THE INFINITE MALLEABILITY OF LOVECRAFTIAN motifs, as exemplified by the contents of this volume, calls for some discussion. Why has H. P. Lovecraft's work been such an inspiration to writers of weird fiction over the past century or so when other meritorious writers—ranging from the “modern masters” identified by Lovecraft himself, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, and M. R. James, to such recent luminaries as Stephen King and Ramsey Campbell—failed to do so?

The history of Lovecraftian pastiche would make an interesting study in itself, and I have attempted to do so in my treatise *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2015). That book shows that, once writers put aside the mechanical imitations—which in many cases extended merely to the invention of a new “god” or new “forbidden book,” even if the overall theme of the story was anything but Lovecraftian—practised by such writers as August Derleth and Brian Lumley, a new era emerged. Writers now began searching more deeply into what exactly went into the making of a “Lovecraftian” story—and came to the conclusion that a multiplicity of motifs could be drawn upon, in contexts Lovecraft himself would scarcely have recognised, with the result that writers could infuse their own personalities into a work that nonetheless draws upon themes pioneered by the dreamer from Providence.

The central message of Lovecraft's work, to be sure, is cosmicism—the depiction of the infinite gulfs of space and time and the concomitant insignificance of the human race, and all earth life, in the overarching history of the cosmos. In his earlier stories, Lovecraft used the figure of the “god” Nyarlathotep as a symbol for this cosmic menace. Archaeological

horror was also a powerful means by which Lovecraft conveyed the essence of cosmicism, and Ann K. Schwader (“Pothunters”), Lynne Jamneck (“Oude Goden”), Don Webb (“The Shard”), and Stephen Woodworth (“Provenance Unknown”) have followed this methodology.

For Lovecraft, the sense of place was supremely important. Here was a man who spent every spare penny in exploring havens of antiquity from Quebec to Key West, from Marblehead, Massachusetts, to Charleston, South Carolina. He enlivened his native New England with an entire constellation of imagined cities where anything can happen; and in this volume, Tom Lynch’s “The Gaunt” takes us to Lovecraft’s Arkham, while Aaron Bittner (“Teshtigo Creek”) duplicates Lovecraft’s regional horror in North Carolina, and veteran W. H. Pugmire (“To Move Beneath Autumnal Oaks”) etches new lines of terror in his carefully crafted Sesqua Valley in the Pacific Northwest. Darrell Schweitzer does much the same thing in the rural Pennsylvania setting of “The Girl in the Attic.”

Alien creatures—whether it be the fish-frog entities from “The Shadow over Innsmouth” or the inbred gorilla-like monstrosities of “The Lurking Fear”—are ever-present in Lovecraft, signalling his fascination with the anomalies of hybridism and the potentially loathsome mutations of the human form. It is this motif that animates such variegated tales as William F. Nolan’s “Carnivorous,” Nancy Kilpatrick’s “The Visitor,” and Steve Rasnic Tem’s “Mister Ainsley.” Jonathan Thomas’s “The Once and Future Waite,” an ingenious riff on “The Thing on the Doorstep,” suggests unthinkable transferences of soul and body, while Jason V Brock’s “Satiety” not only plays a clever riff on the half-plant, half-animal entities in *At the Mountains of Madness* but makes pungently satirical references to recent controversies about Lovecraft’s status in contemporary literature.

Caitlín R. Kiernan takes Lovecraft’s “forbidden book” theme and turns it into a means for probing the psychology of fear in “Ex Libris.” In their various ways, Mark Howard Jones’s “You Shadows That in Darkness Dwell” and Donald Tyson’s “Missing at the Morgue” make use of Lovecraft’s recurrent theme of other worlds lying just around the corner from our own. David Hambling’s “The Mystery of the Cursed Cottage” performs the nearly impossible by fusing the locked-room detective story with Lovecraftian elements.

This volume includes not one but four poems in the Lovecraftian idiom—a testament both to the renaissance of weird poetry in our time and to the felicitous adaptability of Lovecraftian motifs in the realm of verse. Ashley Dioses, Adam Bolivar, K. A. Opperman, and D. L. Myers have all distinguished themselves as poets of technical skill and emotive power, and their verses exhibit the quintessence of terror while adhering to the strictest standards of formal rhyme and metre.

There is no reason to believe that Lovecraft's dominant role in the creation of contemporary weird fiction will end anytime soon, and the future should reveal still more innovative treatments of the themes and imagery he fashioned out of the crucible of his imagination.

S. T. JOSHI

Pothunters

ANN K. SCHWADER

Ann K. Schwader's most recent fiction collection is Dark Equinox and Other Tales of Lovecraftian Horror (Hippocampus Press, 2015). Her most recent poetry collection is Dark Energies (P'rea Press, 2015). She is a two-time Bram Stoker Award Finalist, a two-time winner of the Rhysling Award, and the Poet Laureate for NecronomiCon Providence in 2015.

Schwader lives and writes in Colorado.

1



HATEVER WAS IN THE PACKAGE, JUPE AND JUNO DIDN'T like it. Instead of begging shamelessly for biscuits from the carton Cassie had just brought back from Sheridan, the Rott siblings were pacing around the kitchen table, whining.

She ignored them until she'd put away the groceries. No matter what was going on, Twenty Mile wasn't doing nearly well enough for her to waste frozen food. Not with this fall's two-year-olds still to ship.

It took her a good ten minutes to finish, but the dogs never let up.

As she checked through the week's mail on the table, a too-familiar chill traced her spine. Aside from that box addressed to C. BARRETT, there were only magazines, bills, and junk mail in the pile. Nothing else they'd be likely to react to. Nothing she'd better figure out before a few years' worth of bad memories kicked in.

Cassie picked up the shoebox-sized parcel and checked the rest of the address. Then she headed straight out to the front porch, where her foreman was waiting to talk chore lists.

"Frank, why is somebody with your last name sending me stuff from Santa Fe?"

Frank Yellowtail looked up from his coffee and scowled. "Probably because I told him not to." The scowl deepened. "Joshua's got a stubborn streak a mile wide. Thought the Army might fix that, but it didn't."

Her own jumbo mug o' sanity suddenly seemed like a great idea. Handing over the package, she went back inside to pour herself one—and quiet Jupe and Juno, now whuffling anxiously through the screen door.

By the time she returned, Frank had the box unwrapped.

"Sorry," he said, passing it back. "After the emails I've been getting from that kid these past couple of weeks, I wasn't sure what he might have

sent.”

He glanced past her at the Rotts. “And when those two started in—”

He didn’t need to finish. The early September twilight suddenly felt colder—in a way that had nothing to do with thermometers.

But everything to do with what Frank’s grandfather, a Crow “man of power,” had called *frostbite*: that sensation you got when the Outside touched your smug little reality, and you knew right away because you’d been there before. Or almost there, because folks who went all the way there didn’t come back.

“So who’s Joshua? And what’s he been telling you about this package?”

Frank didn’t answer immediately. Pulling tape from the box’s lid, Cassie lifted it off to reveal wadded newspaper with a couple of envelopes on top. A smaller box nestled inside.

And I’m not digging in until I get some answers.

“He’s my youngest brother’s boy,” Frank finally said. “Went to Afghanistan, went to Iraq, then figured he’d had enough. He’s been working security down in New Mexico for a few years now.”

Cassie kept waiting.

“Last fall, there was some serious rain around Bandelier. Afterwards, the park service found a small side canyon the flood waters had unblocked. There were caves dug into the canyon walls—”

“Cavates?” Cassie leaned forward. “Like an Anasazi site?”

“Maybe.”

Frank’s tone had changed, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know why. Southwestern archaeology was a long-term fascination, but after Zia House—and a certain “Chacoan outlier”—two years ago, she’d learned to look beyond ancestral mysteries of kivas and cavates and petroglyphs. To recognize them as faint shadows of something *other*—

“So what’s this new site got to do with your nephew?” she asked at last.

“After the park service roped off that canyon entrance, they got the state university involved right away. Didn’t want the risk of looters—or lawsuits—if human remains turned up. The anthropology department got all excited and sent somebody out.”

Frank took a long pull on his coffee.

“And?”

“The idea was to investigate quietly. Maybe there wasn’t anything to find. Maybe there was, but some local pueblo had to be consulted. Everything went fine over the winter: site approval got hustled through; grants got written. Come spring, the real work started, and then—”

“The media found out?”

“Something like that.” Frank hesitated. “Joshua thinks they were tipped off by someone at the site—at least, that’s what he was told when the university hired him. After the trouble started.”

Cassie frowned. “Pothunters?”

“Right away. Like they knew what they were looking for, or at least where to find it.”

Her frown deepened. Pothunters were archaeological vermin, and the rural Southwest made an ideal habitat. The region’s meth plague only added to the problem: artifacts became a handy source of cash for addicts, so long as they found a buyer who’d ask no questions.

Or, better yet, swap finds for drugs directly.

“Sounds like Joshua’s got himself a steady job for a while.” She looked down at the box in her lap, suddenly suspicious. “Want to tell me the rest?”

Frank picked up his coffee again. “Not really.”

The smaller of the two envelopes in the box held a letter addressed to her—a long one, with handwritten annotations in the margins of the printout. Cassie paged through it quickly. And set it aside even more quickly.

The second envelope was filled with newspaper clippings, photocopies, and a few photographs. Most of the clippings were from the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. A few came from the *Albuquerque Journal*. The photographs were digital images run on a home color printer.

All but one showed pots, most of them *in situ* and vaguely similar. They were large containers—canteen-style rather than flat seed jars—and looked to be a version of black-on-white. On some of the photos, the jars’ mouths had been circled with red felt-tip.

Cassie picked one up to examine closely. Then another, frowning.

Spiderwebs?

She checked through all the photos with circles. There was certainly *something* sealing the mouths of those jars, but it looked too solid to be the work of any spider she’d ever seen. Or wanted to see.

Setting the photos aside, she dug out the smaller box. It was simple white cardboard, its lid taped down securely.

Jupe and Juno started whining before she even got the tape off.

The potsherd inside looked like a piece from one of the photographed pots: black-on-white, with fresh broken edges. What she could see of the dark clay itself told her nothing, but a grayish sticky tangle marred the sherd's design.

She wrapped her fingers with a tissue before picking it up. A closer look revealed more of the not-quite-spiderwebbing.

Replacing the potsherd in its cotton, Cassie closed the box and dropped it back into the wadded newspapers. Both dogs quieted down. Gathering up the clippings, photographs, photocopies, and letter pages, she tipped them all back into their envelopes and took a deep breath.

"Anything else you don't want to mention? Like why your nephew wants me involved?"

The old kitchen chair Frank sat on creaked ominously. "It's all in the letter."

Cassie sipped at her cooling coffee and waited, trying not to think about the one photograph that hadn't been pots. It had been dated on the back (about two months ago) and showed crime tape around a patch of sparse grass and red soil. A sheet mostly covered a long lump inside.

"Joshua's got a big mouth," Frank finally said. "And his cousin down there's got time on her hands lately. She told you about that, right?"

Julie Valdez was Frank's favorite niece. She was also a dedicated anthropology grad student at the U. of New Mexico. This past spring, her Northern Tewa husband had finally made her choose between Taos Pueblo with him or "wasting her life" on Ph.D. work.

Last Cassie had heard, Julie's wasted life was going just fine. Unfortunately, an earlier part of it involved that summer field school at Zia House—and some, though not all, of what had happened there. Although Julie's research skills had proven invaluable since, Frank was never glad to see her get involved.

He wasn't looking glad now.

"After that . . . incident two months back, the whole dig nearly got shut down. Nothing was ever found at the site, though. After the sheriff's department lost interest in one more meth statistic, everybody got back to

work.” Frank frowned. “But the questions never stopped. And the board of regents started asking their own.”

Cassie couldn’t blame them. Along with the body in that crime tape photo, there had been several large black-on-white potsherds littering the ground.

“Let me guess,” she said. “Julie’s working at this site?”

“No, but her department’s involved. When Joshua called her about his dead pothunter problem, she did a little digging into the area’s history.”

He gestured toward the envelopes in her lap.

“I’m guessing it’s all in that letter, but strange things have happened there before. Just not lately. Julie wanted to go check into it herself, but she’s a teaching assistant now. She suggested that maybe the site director could take on a volunteer—”

Cassie stiffened. After what she’d seen in that “outlier” two years ago, she’d limited her archaeological involvement to working through her magazine piles. Weirdness found her often enough these days without her going looking for it, let alone accepting invitations to look.

Besides, this was a lousy time to be away from Twenty Mile. There were cows and calves to be moved for the winter, two-year-olds headed for market—that chore list she and Frank still had to discuss ran at least two pages. Whatever his nephew thought might be going on around Bandelier could wait.

When she said as much, though, Frank shook his head. “Maybe you’d better check through that letter first.”

The last time he’d sounded this serious about anything but ranch business, it had been January. And she had been snowed in down in Warren, Wyoming—a very small town with a very big weather problem. Which turned out to be neither meteorological nor natural.

Cassie gave the chore list on the porch railing a parting glance. “Guess I’ll go do that,” she said, draining the last of her coffee.

One more test. “And then I’m guessing I’ll have to get McAllister’s box out.”

Frank didn’t even blink.





TWO MEATLOAF SANDWICHES AND WAY TOO MUCH caffeine later, Cassie was certain of only one thing: pothunters were the least of Joshua Yellowtail's troubles.

His letter left no doubt that he suspected this. Fanned out on her desk in all its single-spaced glory, its margins crawled with handwritten notes and rough sketches. Most of the contents came from a log he'd been keeping on his laptop since being hired at the site.

After the first couple of pages, she'd hauled Daniel McAllister's box from the bottom of her closet.

Her hands shook as she unwrapped the old quilt she used for camouflage, even after telling Frank about the box last winter. Post-Warren. The battered beer carton—labeled C. BARRETT PLEASE OPEN in black marker—was another souvenir of Zia House. And the unasked-for legacy of its caretaker: a former professor of Southwestern archaeology who'd fallen victim to unsanctioned curiosity, alcohol, and the Outside.

She'd first met McAllister while searching for a missing fellow student. Rather than helping her find the guy, he'd shared his own experience with the *brand new paradigm* Zia House's recently discovered "outlier" represented. He'd also lent her a monograph that had wrecked her sleep, but probably saved her life.

She'd never gotten the chance to return *An Ethnographic Analysis of Certain Events Associated with Earthen Structures in the Vicinity of Binger, Western Oklahoma, in the Year 1928*. Instead, she'd added it to the box she'd found while unpacking her Jeep afterwards. Along with a stack of his own field journals, McAllister had included a letter. Heavily annotated with references to the Binger monograph and several other sources, it linked Southwestern sites and myths to others less familiar.

And far, far older.

After rereading that letter a few months ago, she'd shoved it behind the bookcase next to her desk. Retrieving it would be a pain, and she doubted she'd forgotten its contents—however much she'd tried to. McAllister hadn't said much about pots or Bandelier, anyhow.

Not in those pages. But in his journals?

C. BARRETT PLEASE OPEN. *As if I have a choice*. Lifting out the worn hardbound notebooks, she began searching through them for significant terms. *Bandelier*, of course (both the Swiss-born anthropologist and the

site), but also *Frijoles Canyon*, *Tyuonyi*, *Pueblo III Era*, *Pueblo IV Era*, and *Jemez Mountains*. On a hunch, she included *black-on-white*.

Even so, she didn't find much at first. Before his academic—and legal—fall from grace, Daniel McAllister's specialty had been the Chaco Phenomenon. It was only later, with grants and university support long gone, that he'd turned to more obscure sites.

But when he had—

Cassie's fingers tightened on the stained page she'd been skimming. In the center, under the notation *cavate wall? Frijoles Canyon area?* and an illegible date, McAllister had sketched a petroglyph. One unlike any she'd seen at the sites she'd visited, or in the few related books she owned.

And not one she'd have overlooked.

She examined the sketch more closely. It was winged, definitely; but not the stubby wings of a parrot or a macaw glyph. Nor the mere lines of a dragonfly. These were widespread and strong, fully as large as the body. But the body of what?

Neither bird nor insect seemed likely: the outline was blocky and crablike, with crooked lines suggesting multiple pairs of legs. A small knob bristling with shorter lines and one longer, curled line (proboscis?) topped it off. Something mythical, then; or spiritual.

Or worse.

Cassie's frown deepened. Last holiday season, she'd volunteered at a charity workshop outside Sheridan—and learned more than she wanted to about Authentic Ancient Designs for a Stronger Community.

Maybe McAllister had, too. Underneath the sketch, he'd added some fragmentary notes. *Pennacook Winged Ones myth? Vermont floods 1927? The Akeley incident?*

None of these referents helped, but a faint chill traced her spine. The next few pages held three more sketches. One was labeled *Petroglyph National Monument, recent discovery*. The other two came from more obscure sites still close to Bandelier.

Though all the glyphs were similar, they weren't identical. One showed that longer curled line uncurling—toward a possibly human figure. In two others, the wing positions suggested flight. And in one of these two, the crooked lines bent around (grasped?) something.

She held the notebook closer and squinted. A circle, maybe. Or a cylinder. Or a pot.

Asked around the [illegible] pueblo, McAllister's notes continued underneath. Not many recognized it. Those who did—all elders—reluctant to explain. Finally tried trading post at [illegible] & got wild tourist story about moon-flyers—

That story took up the next several pages. McAllister's speculations and commentary occupied a few more. When she finally finished, Cassie left the journal open and returned to Joshua's letter, wishing she'd made herself a stiff rum and Coke instead of more coffee.

He hadn't noted any strange petroglyphs at the new site, but there were plenty of pots. Most had been found far in the backs of cavates, nestled in small groups. Almost all had their mouths sealed, though no insects or spiders were entangled in the webbing. No sherds or damaged ceramics had been found—only whole vessels, in remarkably fine condition.

At least until the pothunters found them.

Cassie swore under her breath as she read. Meth addicts were tireless scavengers, but that excess energy made for twitchiness—and sneaking around with flashlights didn't help. Things were bound to get broken. Since there were plenty of pots, nobody cared all that much.

Nobody but Joshua's boss, one Dr. Antoñia Alvarez. According to him, she took every sherd like a personal injury; or the remains of some endangered species. Their particular black-on-white design was, so far as she knew, unique to the site. She'd sent out samples and photos to several other scholars, without success.

In a last-ditch search for clues, she'd even given one fragment to a chemist friend at the university. Results hadn't come back yet, but she felt certain—

Cassie's breath caught. A unique ceramic design. An extremely localized petroglyph. *And both from around the same previously untouched site.*

Grabbing McAllister's journal with its "tourist story," she laid it next to Joshua Yellowtail's letter and started comparing. Joshua's boss hadn't said anything about moon-flyers, but she *had* mentioned a local rumor about the summer night walks at Bandelier. A few years back, one of those walks featured a full moon—and some very strange shadows had flitted across its face.

Everyone knew there were bats in Frijoles Canyon, but even the ranger leading that walk hadn't been able to convince a few observers that they'd seen bats. The result was an article in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, which Joshua had helpfully photocopied.

Cassie read it over a couple of times, checked McAllister's sketches, then brought up a moon-phase app on her phone and entered the date on that *not-just-pots* photo.

Five minutes later, she was packing.

3

ASING HER JEEP DOWN THE BOULDER-STREWN TRAIL she'd barely found on Joshua's map, Cassie felt cold sweat down the back of her neck. On this afternoon of flawless skies and piñon-scented breezes, she was driving into trouble. And she knew it.

Despite all the details she'd been rereading these past two days on the road to New Mexico, Frank's nephew hadn't told her everything. Not about his past month at the site, anyhow. Those last pasted-in logs hadn't just been briefer; they'd been vaguer, as though he'd been struggling not to say something.

What he *had* managed to put in was disturbing enough.

While trying to identify that black-on-white design, Dr. Alvarez had taken her sherds and questions all the way to Gallup, Mecca of trading post junkies. Even the shop owners there couldn't help—which hadn't stopped them from passing on local rumors about the Bandelier area.

Some of those rumors were even weirder than McAllister's. Alvarez hadn't known to ask about petroglyphs, but moon-flyers (or something similar) still came up. Like the Roswell aliens, there were no well-documented sightings, and a fair number of others involved alcohol. There was little agreement about their appearance. Some said crustaceans, some said bats or insects, and others claimed that they shifted forms or resembled something else entirely.

Almost all sightings had happened around full moons.

Since none of these stories involved ceramics, Alvarez had eventually given up and returned to her site. Later inquiries around Museum Hill in

Santa Fe hadn't yielded much more, aside from one docent at the Wheelwright whose Navajo great-grandmother had advised her to stay out of those canyons.

Meanwhile, despite Joshua Yellowtail's best efforts, pothunters kept raiding. Night after night, they found new caches. Morning after morning, Alvarez picked up sherds and swore. Joshua suspected someone on her team was feeding information to the looters. Alvarez was sure of it—which was why she'd pushed through Cassie's paperwork.

And my last volunteer experience went so well.

Cassie death-gripped the wheel as one front tire almost dropped into a hole. Beyond it, the trail widened into a clearing with a few other vehicles. After parking her own, she reached into the glove compartment for her carry pistol, checked it, and holstered it beneath her shirttail.

The process still felt awkward, but there was no sense being stupid. Not after last winter. Finances were always tight at Twenty Mile, but Frank had looked relieved when she'd signed up for permit classes. No more worrying about being pulled over with the big .44 she used to hide as road medicine. No more going into situations unprepared.

Assuming the situation could be prepared for.

As she walked down into the narrow canyon, she was surprised by the number of cavates pocking its walls. None of the articles Joshua had sent mentioned past inhabitants. Aside from ceramics, there had been little of archaeological interest: no trash middens, no tools or weapons. And until two months ago, no human remains.

Meeting the gaze of those blind shadow eyes, she felt her breath catch. If humans hadn't been digging into the tuff here, what had?

A few minutes later, the flapping of a bright blue tarp told her she'd arrived.

"Cassie?" One of the three people under that tarp—a youngish man in a khaki uniform shirt—raised a hand to shade his eyes. "Cassie Barrett?"

Cassie grabbed the strap of her backpack and trotted the last few yards.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, mostly to the woman beside him. "I did have a map, but—"

Dr. Antônia Alvarez waved away her apology. "Maps don't work too well out here."

Alvarez was forty-something and fit, though her dark eyes had darker shadows under them. She'd been sitting at a folding table with her laptop and a tray of potsherds, but set them aside as Cassie approached.

"Don't know why I bother." She glanced ruefully at the sherds. "I have no idea where most of these came from, and there'll be more tomorrow."

Her gaze shifted to a thin blonde girl packing up equipment nearby.

"We'll take care of that, Kit. You can go on back to town."

Cassie expected the girl—a grad student?—to head out immediately, but she took her time. Alvarez stayed quiet until she'd disappeared up the trail.

Joshua Yellowtail seemed equally uncomfortable.

"Glad you could make it, Cassie," he finally said. "After talking to Uncle Frank—"

"He was all right with it. For a few days, anyway."

Joshua's expression didn't change. Both of them knew how little Twenty Mile could spare even one pair of hands right now. When Alvarez motioned toward an empty chair, Cassie sat gratefully.

"Your paperwork came through fine," Alvarez said. "Julie Valdez said good things about you, and you've had enough applicable coursework to keep my department happy."

She handed her a volunteer form and a pen. "Of course, it's still a short-term position."

Cassie nodded. "Like maybe three days?"

Alvarez gave Joshua Yellowtail a hard look. "I thought we discussed—"

Not telling me what the hell is really going on down here?

"I checked the date on that picture with the crime tape," Cassie finally said. "It was a full moon, two months back. And the pots—or at least the sherds—around here got you some 'moon-flyer' rumors in Gallup."

Her hand fastened on the backpack propped against her chair.

"There have been other rumors like that, in this part of the country." *And petroglyphs to go with them. Which means a long time.* "Three days and nights from now is also a full moon—the Harvest Moon."

Cold certainty shot down her spine.

"So what happened here on the full moon last month?"

For a moment, there was no reply but the distant cicadas.

Then Joshua picked up his phone, opened it to a picture, and passed it over.

It was a night shot, slightly out of focus. The body of a young woman—fully dressed, ratty jeans and a tank top—sprawled on dirt. She'd been pothunting: a nylon knapsack gaped open for her latest find, now shattered on the ground nearby. Even in flash glare, Cassie recognized its distinctive design.

That wasn't what made her breath catch, though.

"How did she—?"

"No clue." Joshua's voice was tight. "But I think I found her right after it happened, whatever it was."

Both of them glanced down at the phone. At the girl's face twisted in a frozen shriek, mouth wide open and bloody.

"I was checking one of our latest find spots," Joshua continued. "Thought I heard somebody back in a cave. Not close, so I thought I'd come up quiet and nail them when they crawled out."

He hesitated.

"A couple of minutes later, I heard buzzing up ahead—but not like insects. Not like any insect I've ever heard, anyhow. Almost felt like it was going through my skull—or maybe inside it—"

Another silence. Longer.

"—and then there was this one short scream. A girl's. But it wasn't cut off. More like *choked* off, like somebody shoved something down her throat."

Still staring at the phone screen, Cassie forced herself to nod.

"By the time I got there, she was . . . like that. The buzzing was gone. And there were sherds everywhere—"

He glanced a question at Alvarez.

"Go on," she said. "Might as well tell it all."

"After last time, I figured we'd get shut down for good if I called in another death. So I didn't." Joshua raked a hand through his short hair. "I put the body in a cave looters had already emptied. And then I picked up every last piece of that pot."

Cassie's stomach clenched.

"It's not as though dead tweakers are anything new around here," said Alvarez. "Santa Fe gets a lot of runaways. Some are on drugs when they

show up; others find them.”

Her hands tightened on the edge of the table. “It doesn’t help that we’ve got our own local dealer—maybe meth cook, too—with a sideline in artifacts. Trades drugs for pots and whatever else they bring in, which is plenty.” Her knuckles showed pale. “From looting my site!”

Joshua shot Cassie a *here we go again* look.

“Just this morning,” Alvarez continued, “I finally got a chemical analysis of the clay from one sherd. Not what I was expecting. Basalt, a lot of it—and even armalcolite.”

Cassie frowned. “Armalco-what?”

“It’s a mineral. Pretty rare. And the first place they found it was the moon.”

Joshua looked dubious. “Moon pots?”

Reaching into her backpack for McAllister’s field journal, Cassie flipped to the petroglyph sketches. *Moon-flyer sketches*. Selecting the one carrying a circle, she pushed it across the table to Alvarez.

In the silence that followed, Cassie felt sweat drying cold on the back of her neck.

Then Alvarez exhaled sharply.

“That’s . . . interesting.” She picked up the battered notebook. “I’d like to borrow this tonight, if you don’t—”

“I made you copies.”

Before Alvarez could complain, Cassie retrieved her property and stowed it away. If the archaeologist wasn’t happy with the manila envelope she got back, she wasn’t showing it. Much.

“I’ll still need the original when I write up my field notes. The ceramics we’re finding here are unique. Not just that clay, but the black-on-white pattern.”

Cassie nodded, trying to look as if she knew more than she probably did.

“There’s something else about them,” Alvarez added. “But only the sealed ones, the ones with the webs.”

Disquiet crossed her face. “Or whatever that is.”

“It happens when you touch them.” Joshua’s voice dropped. “There’s some kind of tangible reaction—”

“More than that. And it happens in your head.”

The security guard and the archaeologist stared at each other. Cassie got the distinct impression that they'd both had this experience separately. And hadn't shared it afterwards, for whatever reason.

She could think of a few.

"I could show you a cache," Joshua finally said. "It was fine last night, anyhow. I don't think the looters know about it yet—"

He stopped short. "If that's OK, Dr. Alvarez?"

Alvarez glanced back up toward the parking area before replying.

"Go ahead," she said. "But keep an eye out. We can't afford to keep losing pots."

4



THEY WERE SEVERAL MINUTES INTO THE CANYON before Joshua Yellowtail spoke again. Looking up at the shadow-pocked walls, Cassie wondered what else he hadn't put into that letter.

Or had been told to leave out?

Zia House's director had been chasing something unique, too—and she'd caught it. Or it caught her, the way the Outside did when people weren't paying attention. When they thought they'd found some private exception to the rules of this world, but it was still OK, all perfectly natural

"I said, have you got a flashlight?"

Cassie gave Joshua a guilty half-smile. "In my backpack." Her amusement faded. "But I'm not going into any dark holes until you tell me what's going on with Dr. Alvarez. Why'd she want me down here, anyhow?"

Joshua took a careful look up and around.

"Kit Baker." He shrugged. "And tenure."

Cassie winced. *Just when I thought it couldn't get any better.*

"She thinks Kit's feeding information to pothunters?"

"To somebody working with pothunters. Maybe that dealer she was talking about—Len Mason, I think his name is. Serious bad guy. I've run him off once or twice."

He hesitated. “Not sure why she’d be doing it, though she and Dr. Alvarez don’t exactly get along.” A longer pause. “But she knew about that new find spot last month. And the one in the picture I sent you.”

Cassie bit her lip.

“Do I even want to know about the tenure part?”

“I don’t even know about it, officially. But one thing you learn working security is to keep your ears open.”

And one thing she’d learned about frostbite was to trust it.

Jupe and Juno hadn’t liked that sherd one bit. McAllister’s notes and Alvarez’s chemical analysis of another sherd dovetailed a little too well. Now here she was, about to go headfirst into a cavate with who knew how many whole pots— and touch them.

Resisting the urge to check the small .38 under her shirttail, Cassie kept walking. Joshua Yellowtail was Frank’s nephew, after all. Not likely to lead her into danger.

But she wouldn’t have figured him for stashing an inconvenient body, either.

A few minutes later, he stopped and pointed at the canyon wall just above her head.

“Maybe that’s why looters didn’t find it first. Not real easy to get at, though there must have been a ladder there once. Or handholds that eroded.”

Cassie frowned up at the dark opening.

“So how did Dr. Alvarez even think to check it?”

“She mentioned hearing something strange in the wind here.” He shrugged. “All I know is, she hasn’t told any of her students—and she always brings her own stepladder back at the end of the day.”

Cassie took off her backpack and removed the flashlight, plus a pair of work gloves. Then she jumped up for the cavate’s edge, managing to find handholds on her second try. As she scrambled for footing on the wall below, Joshua’s interlaced hands gave her a boost.

“Thanks.”

He passed the flashlight up. In its strong beam, the cavate looked larger and taller than it had from outside, its ceiling nearly high enough for her to stand. Or at least crouch. Moving carefully, she shuffled toward the back.

A mineral tang of rock and dust filled her nostrils. Nothing else. *So far, so good—*

Cassie froze. The few pots nestled at the back of the cavate had more webbing across their mouths than the ones in Joshua's photos. It looked fresh, too; silvery-moist in her flashlight beam.

As for the pots themselves, they actually *were* black-on-white. Not the worn gray-on-chalk seen in museum cases, or the dingy charcoal and tan of sherds she'd been tempted by at trading posts. And no chips or cracks she could see—from a distance.

Up close, the canteen-style vessels were even more disturbing, as though their Anasazi creator had just set them down and walked away. Alvarez was right about the design, though. Beneath these simple crosshatchings and spirals, diamonds and saw-toothed lines, something else had left its mark.

And all those spirals dark galaxies flecked with suppurating stars—

Gritting her teeth, Cassie pulled off her left glove.

Then, before she could think about it, she pressed her palm against the nearest pot.

At first, she felt nothing but the cool strangeness of the clay. The vessel beneath her hand curving . . . outward. Outward toward the thinnest edge of space, where all laws of small blue spheroids shattered against the inchoate Beyond.

Where the only human sound was a soul-deep shrieking.

5



BACK ACHING AFTER A LONG MORNING OF CATALOGING potsherds, Cassie swore under her breath as she headed up the trail. No surprise that she'd forgotten her lunch. After getting back from her little hike yesterday afternoon, she'd barely managed to drive herself safely to Santa Fe. Checking into her hotel had been its own adventure.

Sleep hadn't come until the small stark hours. When it had, her dreams had driven her back to the room's single chair, where she'd paged through McAllister's journal until sunrise.

His comments on the moon-flyer story drew most of her attention. What a flood in Vermont had to do with tourist rumors in New Mexico, she couldn't imagine—until she rechecked his four petroglyphs. The descriptions in those 1927 articles didn't mirror what he'd drawn, but they'd been close. There was no good reason for that. No explanation at all for the object held by one "flying" glyph.

At least, none she wanted to consider after touching that pot.

Cassie wiped her left hand on her jeans and kept walking. She'd lost her appetite, but soda from her cooler would make a change from the tepid water Alvarez provided. Even that was in short supply: the archaeologist had taken several bottles when she and her stepladder headed out this morning. A last wave of monsoon rain was on its way, she'd heard. No time to waste at her new favorite cavate.

If Joshua had told her about yesterday's visit, Alvarez hadn't mentioned it. Cassie wasn't about to, either. Not with Kit hanging around poking at her laptop, long after she should have—

" . . . I'm almost out, dammit. And you said you'd get me some."

Kit's voice drifted down from the parking area ahead. She was on her phone, Cassie guessed: the signal was a lot better up there, though still not great.

She wasn't sounding that great, either. Cassie had noticed her looking shaky most of the morning—hung over, she'd assumed. Or coming down with something. Or . . . ?

Edging into a stand of pines beside the trail, Cassie kept listening.

"No, not until the end of the month!"

Whatever Kit was hearing on the other end, she wasn't liking it.

"You know that's not going to work, you bastard." Long silence. *"Look, maybe I can find you something. Another cache—"*

Cassie's teeth found her lower lip. Joshua was right: the pothunters, or someone running them, were getting inside help. And not for the first time, either.

"So what am I supposed to do, tail her? That would work real well." Kit's voice was raw. *"All I know is, she takes a ladder out sometimes. If I find out more—"*

Her voice cut off. After a few minutes—and another expletive—she headed down the trail, veering close to Cassie's hiding place.

Easing back into shadow, Cassie held her breath. No point in denying she'd been doing exactly what she had been doing if she got noticed—and Kit was on edge to start with. Possibly close to withdrawal, but from what?

And getting it where?

The questions distracted her until Kit passed by, hands shoved into her pockets. The grad student looked even paler than she had this morning, and twitchier. Sweat plastered her light hair to her forehead. Wherever her attention was, it didn't seem to be on her surroundings—

But even after, there was no way to be sure.

* * *

Cassie stayed late that afternoon, hoping to talk with Alvarez when she got back. After the first awkward hour or so, she'd found herself working alone: Kit ditched out early, complaining of a stomach bug. She looked sick enough, but Cassie felt more curiosity than sympathy.

Rather than risking either, she focused on her tray of sherds—not hard, after yesterday. Touching them was something else again. Even with the disposable gloves Alvarez insisted on, her fingertips recoiled from their too-perfect surfaces.

Their freshly broken edges were worse. Nothing made from local clay should be the color of space, or laced with a mineral first discovered on the Moon. How was *that* happening? Then there were McAllister's petroglyph sketches of moon-flyers . . . and sightings during full-moon walks at Bandelier—

Glancing out at the innocent sky beyond the tarp's shade, Cassie shivered.

Quitting time came and went without Alvarez returning. After locking her university laptop, potsherd tray, and other supplies in the site's small trailer, she headed up the trail with frequent backward glances.

Just thinking about anyone being in that cavate so late in the day made her stomach clench. Handling sherds was bad enough, but at least they felt, if not normal, inert. Unlike the web-sealed pot she'd touched yesterday.

There's something else about them, Alvarez had said. Or *in* them? If pothunters were leaving broken pots, surely they were spilling their

contents. Neither Alvarez nor Joshua had mentioned finding anything, though, and the newspaper articles focused on the ceramics themselves.

Yet the pot she'd laid her palm against had not been empty. Its contents had resonated through her with a terrible reality—

Cassie froze. In the parking area just ahead, a man she didn't recognize was leaning against her Jeep. His body language said he'd been there a while, and he didn't look happy. Or unarmed.

The barrel of his pump shotgun was significantly shorter than legal, though it wasn't aimed in her direction. No telling if he'd already spotted her, but she had to assume that he had—and she wasn't nearly close enough to the trees. Turning and running didn't sound much safer.

Cassie snuck a hand under her shirttail.

The weedy-looking man stared at her for several seconds before his shotgun's barrel edged up. "*That's far enough!*"

Sidestepping quickly, she raised her own weapon. He didn't lower his.

Sick cold washed through her. "What's the problem?"

He hawked and spat into the dirt between them.

"Got a message for you." Hawk. Spit. "About minding your own damn business. And going back where you came from, wherever the hell that is."

Cassie's mind churned. This guy hadn't expected her to be carrying—*one thing Kit hadn't noticed?*—but he wasn't backing down, either. No telling what might be fueling that, though he didn't look twitchy enough for a full-blown meth addict.

And she wasn't dead enough. Yet.

"First good thing that's happened around here in years. First chance for some serious money." His hands tightened on the stock of the shotgun. "Can't get enough of those pots . . . nothing like them on the market anywhere—"

The engine rumble of a big pickup interrupted. It was coming in fast, and the driver didn't seem overly concerned with safety. As the Tundra came within a foot of clipping him, her would-be assailant fumbled his grip—and Cassie bailed for cover.

By the time Joshua Yellowtail climbed from his truck, 9mm pistol in hand, the man was long gone.

"You all right, Cassie?"

“More or less.” As she emerged from the trees, Joshua gave her a look. She quickly replaced the .38 under her shirttail.

“Please tell me you have a permit for that.”

When she nodded, he holstered his own weapon and walked over to check her Jeep for damage. Neither of them found any, though Cassie admitted it might be hard to tell.

“Good timing, by the way,” she said. “Thanks!”

Joshua shrugged. “Just starting my work shift a little early.” His frown returned. “So what did Len Mason want?”

Leftover adrenaline washed through her. *Oh.*

“Kit must have told him something. She was on her phone up here at lunchtime, pretty emotional about being ‘almost out.’ I had no idea at the time who she might be talking to—”

As she told the rest, Joshua’s expression darkened.

“Dr. Alvarez thought she might have a problem. Probably oxycodone. Kit had a screwed-up back from some accident, and she was still taking pills for it.” His frown deepened. “A lot of pills.”

And grad students don’t make squat for teaching pay. Cassie nodded grimly.

“Question is,” said Joshua, “what do we do about it?”

“Not the sheriff’s department. Or police.”

The notion of law enforcement meeting up with those pots triggered a long mutual silence. Mason was right: there was nothing like them on the black market—or on this planet, Cassie suspected. How did his meth-fueled looters ignore that?

Joshua sighed.

“OK, but we at least have to tell Alvarez what’s going on. Now. Let her figure out what to do about Kit—though canning her isn’t going to stop the looting—”

He stopped, looking more cheerful.

Cassie stared at him. “What?”

“Maybe she doesn’t need to be canned. Maybe she just needs to see that new cache.”

And maybe we both need our heads examined.

But she didn’t have a better idea—not yet, anyway. Whatever had happened here these past two full moons, they had to stop it from happening again.

6



UDDLED BEHIND THE NEAREST CONVENIENT BOULDER, Cassie shifted her weight and tried to ignore other rocks under her rear. It wasn't working.

It hadn't worked last night, either, when she and Alvarez spent several chilly hours watching with Joshua. Alvarez had taken Kit with her for that whole day at the new cache. She'd even let her photograph a few pots. They'd all hoped she'd take the bait right away—from the look of her, Kit hadn't scored any more pills—but the cavate remained undisturbed.

Which was more than Cassie could say for herself.

McAllister's petroglyphs flapped across her imagination, clutching circular objects with their stick arms. Or legs. Or *claws*? Suppressing the thought, she strained her eyes against the darkness, trying to spot Joshua hiding nearby.

She wondered if he was as unhappy as she was with their timing. September's full moon could be spectacular, but tonight they didn't need the drama.

The high desert night sky was dramatic enough. Once she'd been unafraid to open her eyes wide to it—to tilt her head back and fall into those stars marked out against the void. Now she knew better. Stargazing only reminded her that the void stared back.

She suspected Joshua Yellowtail knew better, too. Whether he'd learned on his own or inherited some of his great-grandfather's talent, he hadn't been eager to crawl back into that hole himself.

Alvarez, on the other hand—

Cassie froze as footsteps sounded farther down the trail. Hard to tell how many, but they were definitely headed toward the cavate. Moonlight helped. Even from here, she could make out its faint outline against the cliff face.

For another minute or so, she focused on those steps. Two sets, max: moonlight or not, sneaking around in the dark wasn't a group activity.

Then Joshua's whisper sounded close beside her. "*Look up!*"

At first, she saw nothing but the moon, just visible now above the canyon wall. Pale and featureless, it shone like a silver concha in the black.

Then a shadow—no, two shadows—threw themselves across that pristine surface.

Cassie bit her lip hard. Whatever those night-walking tourists at Frijoles Canyon had thought they'd seen, she was seeing it now. Skin-wings stretched out into sails against the moonlight, obscuring bodies with far too many appendages. Too many waving, clutching pairs. And no heads at all; not that she could make out at this distance.

Joshua Yellowtail sucked in his breath. "*Shit.*"

Cassie wondered if Alvarez had seen them yet. Lacking a weapon, the archaeologist had hidden herself further away, though still with a clear view of the cavate. Better if she was watching that, rather than these . . . *moon-flyers?* . . . flickering in and out against the sky.

A muffled thump recalled Cassie's attention. Two figures, one distinctly larger, now stood below the cavate mouth. The larger individual had just dumped a pack on the ground. As she watched, he began rummaging through it, while his companion held a flashlight.

" . . . Hurry up! I know she's got that guard out here tonight . . . What're you looking for, anyway?"

Cassie stiffened as she recognized the voice. If Kit was out here, Len Mason had probably bullied her into it. And come along himself, to confirm the promised cache?

Pulling out a rock hammer and a handful of pitons, he headed for the cliff face and started tapping one in.

"Len . . . !"

A hideous buzzing cut through the air. Moments later, Cassie gasped as the same vibration began inside her skull, filling it like a thousand metallic cicadas—

No, not cicadas. Not anything from this clean planet. Frostbite stinging down her spine told her all she needed to know, and far more than she wanted to.

Beside her, Joshua Yellowtail cursed and drew his pistol. One moon-flyer had flickered out of the dark above Len Mason—straight into Kit's jittering flashlight beam. Its body was the size of a Rottweiler, with unfurled wings at least double that length, and only knotted cilia above its shoulders. The carapace was translucent. Reddish-purple masses inside

pulsed and quivered as it dove on the man, grappling him with several appendages and pulling him close.

Len Mason shrieked. Once.

Then a glistening tube uncoiled from the top of the thing and shoved itself down his throat.

Kit dropped the flashlight and bolted back down the trail, wailing. Cassie grabbed Joshua's arm as he tried to go after her.

Moments later, a second high scream cut off abruptly.

The buzzing in Cassie's mind exploded into white pain. As she fought against it, disconnected images flashed past her tear-filled eyes. *The moon-flyer's proboscis whipping back up into that writhing mass of cilia. Mason's corpse sprawled on the ground, streaming darkness from a ruined mouth. A canteen-style pot gripped by two clawed appendages. Light? . . . Energy? . . . leaking out as other appendages wove thick strands across its neck—*

"Cassie?"

Joshua was shaking her by the shoulder. His own eyes still streamed with tears, and a thin trickle of blood marked his upper lip.

Cassie wiped at her own nose. Her own blood. "I'm OK." She blinked away more tears. "You?"

When he didn't answer, she followed his gaze to the cliff face—and the batlike crawl of the moon-flyer working its way up. Furling its wings, it scrabbled at the lip of the cavate mouth before disappearing inside. A burst of cicada noises followed.

Then, for several minutes, silence.

When the creature reemerged, it was already launching into the air, wings spreading wide. A webbed and glistening cluster of pots trailed behind it as it rose to meet the moon. Cassie winced. The *harvest* moon—

Pebbles crunched behind her. Before she could reach the gun at her back, Dr. Alvarez was crouching down beside Joshua. The archaeologist switched on a small flashlight and aimed it forward.

Then switched it off again, fast. "What the hell just happened?"

Nothing I want to discuss out here. Cassie took a deep breath and glanced up, though she already knew what she'd see.

Or not see.

Unclipping a larger flashlight from his belt, Joshua rose and headed for the trail Kit had taken. Cassie and Alvarez followed—one with her gun

drawn, the other doing her best to ignore it. As they moved through the dark in silence, McAllister's field notes haunted Cassie's mind.

Whatever else they found tonight, she knew, it had happened before. And elsewhere. Pennacook territory, long before the Europeans came. Vermont, in 1927. New Mexico, early and often enough to leave petroglyphs on remote canyon walls. The Outside was nothing if not persistent—

She stumbled as Joshua Yellowtail put out an arm to stop her.

"I found Kit," he said. "It's bad."

"I've seen dead bodies before."

Joshua shook his head. "Not like this."

No, worse. What her *brand new paradigm* had left of Zia House's director, for starters. The fiery end of that charity workshop outside Sheridan. And, just this past winter, a truck plaza parking lot in Warren.

But this was bad enough.

As Joshua finally lowered his arm, Cassie's breath caught. Kit had fought far harder than Len Mason had, though it hadn't saved her.

A freshly webbed pot lay a few feet from the body. Its surface was spattered with inky, iridescent liquid, and faint threads of light seeped from its mouth. As Cassie watched, the last of these faded into night.

She glanced at Joshua. He glanced at her.

Then they both moved back at once, nearly running into Alvarez as she stood in the middle of the trail, flashlight dangling from her hand. The archaeologist's mouth moved silently.

She wasn't looking past them at Kit's remains. She was staring up.

Cassie followed her gaze. From several locations in the canyon—and a few beyond it—flickering silhouettes climbed toward the moon. In ones and twos, some towing netted clusters behind them, they converged into a single shadow against its shining disk.

And then they were gone, and there was only moonlight.

* * *

Fat raindrops spattered Cassie's windshield as she drove north toward Cheyenne, radio tuned to 24/7 weather. The Jeep's wipers were barely

keeping up. Monsoon season was going out with a vengeance, just as Alvarez had predicted.

Tenure wasn't looking so certain for her, but at least she'd have plenty of time to write up her notes—without McAllister's field journal, of course. Anticipating another season at the site, she'd already handed the current semester's course load over to her grad students.

Minus one. Cassie bit her lip. Unable to resist a last perfect pot, Alvarez had retrieved the one near Kit's body.

It was still awaiting cataloguing.

“ . . . flash flood warnings are in effect for the Los Alamos area, including Bandelier National Monument and all nearby canyons. Severe flooding and rockslides are expected to block access for weeks—”

Cassie leaned forward and turned off the radio, grimacing as her back twinged. Several hours with a crowbar, she thought, could do that to a person.

She drove on in silence, listening to the rain.

The Girl in the Attic

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

Darrell Schweitzer remarks that his career seems to be growing tentacles of late. This is recently evidenced by a collection of his Lovecraftian and weird fictions, Awaiting Strange Gods, published by Fedogan & Bremer in August 2015. His historical Cthulhu Mythos anthology, That Is Not Dead, was published by PS Publishing in 2015 and was followed by Tales from the Miskatonic Library (coedited with John Ashmead). His stories have appeared in numerous Lovecraft-related anthologies in the past few years. He coedited Weird Tales for nineteen years and is the author of three novels, The White Isle, The Shattered Goddess, and The Mask of the Sorcerer, in addition to about 300 published stories.



HORAZIN, PENNSYLVANIA WAS (AND IS) A SMALL town, if you could even call it that: a few farms, a cluster of houses around a single street, a church with the steeple blasted off and its white wooden sides still charred, a one-room schoolhouse by a stream, a general store with gas pumps out front that usually don't work, and a surprisingly large graveyard near a circle of standing stones where the people gather on certain occasions, at the right time with the turning of the stars and seasons, to perform certain rites. The town itself is a secret, hidden away in the upper, central part of the state near the New York line that is mostly blank on a map, amid long, dark valleys where there are only occasional specks of light at night to be seen from the winding roads.

It has its own secrets, too, some of them hidden even from itself.

In one of those houses, a house where no one lives, and which has been boarded up for years, there is a girl chained in the attic. She was once strikingly beautiful, almost fully grown. But her face is gone, blown away by gunshots in the course of some adventure. Her mind is gone, so the common report has it, and she sits perpetually on the floor, her head resting on her drawn up knees, her arms limply at her sides. She makes no sound and never stirs, requiring neither food nor water nor cleansing, for her body has turned hard, like wax or even soft stone; she is neither dead nor alive, and she has been thus for years or centuries or just a few days. It is hard to tell on this last point, because time itself in Chorazin can slip, as if trying to climb a muddy slope and sliding back down again.

Despite which, the girl is still kept chained by her ankles to a vertical beam in the center of the room which holds up the roof, just in case.

The elders check on her from time to time, as the stars tell them, and repeat a certain word over her. Then they go away and she remains just a story, though at one time she was none other than the Red Witch of

Chorazin, the girl covered in fire, whose wandering along the dark ridgelines beyond the town could be mistaken for a sunset.

But her fire had gone out, her face gone from misadventure, her mind gone, her body a stiff shell.

A secret, without a name. No one spoke her name, though the elders still knew it.

* * *

The secret was that her mind was gone because it had departed elsewhere, traveling in something like dreams, first into the houses nearby, then beyond. People sensed her passage like an unsettling breath of wind, only there for a second, then gone. She drifted over the hills once more, down into adjoining valleys, alone and incorporeal in the night.

Once she met a man in the woods who had parked his car and come up from the highway for some reason. She embraced him, and before he could even scream he burst into flame and was consumed almost to ashes. She herself was not burnt, though she was clothed in flame again, as the Red Witch had been, for a little while at least. If the charred corpse was ever found, it did not matter. The man was a stranger. Possibly the incident found its way into a supermarket tabloid like *Weekly World News* as a “mystery of spontaneous human combustion,” but if so that did not matter either, because there were no supermarkets in Chorazin and nobody read tabloids. It had rained that night. The forest was wet and the fire did not spread.

Once, too, in her dreams, after she had drifted among the stars, perhaps for an eternity folded back on itself so that the ending of the dream took place at the same instant as the beginning, she dwelt on a black, sunless world in a jagged valley where bestial stone gods sat in two infinite rows, whispering; and one of those gods leaned down, with the thundering voice of an avalanche, and said to her, “Now awaken.”

That was how it began—a secret in the attic.

She raised her head from off her knees, in the attic. The red flame burned within the ruin of her face.

She tried to speak, but made only a little sound.

At first the chains baffled her, but then she stepped out of them, perhaps incorporeally, or else like a snake shedding its skin. She herself did not know how it was done, but the sensation was very physical. She was standing naked in the cold attic. She listened and heard the wind whistling softly over the roof and, somewhere far away, what might be a cowbell ringing. She walked barefoot down the attic stairs, feeling the smooth, gritty steps one by one.

The door at the bottom was closed. She fumbled with the doorknob clumsily, as if her hands had forgotten what to do next. Then she squeezed the knob without turning it, and the door was covered with pale fire, which did not consume and gave off no heat. But that was enough, and the door opened.

She found herself in a familiar hallway. There was a washstand outside one of the rooms, with a big bowl in it, filled with dust. This struck her as an odd place for a washstand. She attempted a smile and continued on.

She came to another room that she knew very well. The door was open. She went in. She wanted light, but there were no candles, and the oil lamp on the stand by the side of the bed was empty. With a concentration of her mind, she made light. It was as natural as breathing. Soon the walls and furniture were all aglow with pale fire, of the sort she'd used to open the attic door, tiny flickering white flames that did not burn or give off heat, like St. Elmo's fire perhaps, something she'd read about in books, in sea stories. For all she had traveled widely now, she had never seen St. Elmo's fire, so she could only guess it was like that.

Still naked, oblivious to that fact, she lovingly explored the room, reaching out to touch the things that were hers: a whole shelf of porcelain-faced dolls in fine dresses, now, like everything else, faded and covered with dust. When she'd grown too old to play with dolls, she had placed them on that shelf in a neat row, as a memorial to her former self, and there they had remained.

There was another shelf of her books, and a stack of *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*, something else left behind but not discarded. She got down a particularly treasured volume, opened it, and saw written on the endpaper in pencil, in a very childish hand, "This book belongs to: MARIE." Yes, that was her name, she recalled now, but it was her everyday

name, the name she used all the time, not her *other* name, the one for secrets, which only the elders knew.

Still holding the book, she sat down on the dusty comforter that covered the bed. She read through the book for a few minutes, then put it aside and lay down, stretching languorously, carefully noting and savoring each sensation. She stared up at the ceiling, remembering when she had lain in this bed and stared at that ceiling for so long that she imagined rivers and mountains and whole, strange countries in the ripples and cracks of the plaster; but she had done that when she was very small, and now that she had journeyed much more widely, the ceiling was only plaster.

A tear ran down her ruined face.

After a while she felt cold and sat up. She went through the closet and was distressed to find that most of her clothing was chewed to shreds by moths, but at last she found some things that she could wear, however dusty: underthings, a blouse, a skirt that went down to her ankles, stockings, and high shoes.

Then she sat down at her dressing table to comb her hair, which was indeed a mess. In the mirror, her eyes and nostrils and slightly open mouth and the holes in her cheeks were filled with fire, so she looked a bit like a badly carved jack-o'-lantern.

Now the gentle fire spread through the whole house, consuming nothing but filling the house with light. She listened where she sat, in increasing anticipation, to the house coming alive with sounds and smells. Someone stirring in the kitchen. Pots clanking. A small dog barking. And finally a voice calling out, "Marie! Time for dinner! Come down!"

So she went down, still relishing, exploring every sensation, running her hand gently along the railing, stopping to gaze at each of the framed prints on the wall, which showed either her ancestors, or strange beasts, or both.

"Marie!"

At the base of the stairs she stood for a long time gazing into the parlor to her left. Her sheet music was still on the piano. She noticed her younger brother John's toy Noah's Ark on the table there, with the pairs of wooden animals carefully arranged two by two.

"Marie! It's Thanksgiving!"

Indeed it was. To her right was the dining room. There, indeed, she found her family seated around the table, her father in his three-piece suit with watch-chain, smiling, the ends of his moustache pointing upward as he did; her brother Johnny in his sailor suit, sitting still for once; her mother in her lace-collared dress. The family spaniel, Mister Ears, had settled down in the corner with a bone.

The whole room and the family glowed with the same magical, pale fire that filled the house with light.

It was Thanksgiving, but this was Chorazin after all, so Thanksgiving was not quite the same as elsewhere, any more than her brother's toy Noah's Ark in the other room had been quite the standard model. (Two of the creatures were shapeless, flowing things; something half like a man, half like a cuttlefish crouched on the roof of the Ark to welcome the passengers aboard.) Papa gave thanks to the Whispering Voices of the Air, and to the Winged Ones That Come, and to the Earth Shaker, and to the Gods We Await. The thanks was not so much for the repast before them (turkey and sweet potatoes and beans with almonds, bread, puddings, and candied fruit) but for the expectation that when the earth is cleared off, those who were faithful would find some place in the new, strange, and transformed world. Amen.

Nevertheless, Marie was happy to be here, in this one perfect moment. She wanted nothing more than to remain suspended in it forever like an insect in amber.

If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up.

But, to her horror, she heard again the voice of the colossal stone god, the one that bent forward as an avalanche, telling her to wake up, and wake up fully.

No, she said, under her breath.

And aloud she said, "I love you, Mama. I love you, Papa. I even love you, Johnny, and Mister Ears."

"We love you too," said her mother.

But her mother was burning. There was a fire behind her face, as if she were a paper doll and a smoldering candle had been shoved inside her. Now the flames burst out—not the gentle flames that illuminated everything, but the kind that devoured.

"Mama!"

Marie tried to concentrate, to *will* the fire away, and gradually it receded, but her mother's whole face was gone, and her head began to crumple inward, even though her hands were going through the normal motion of buttering a piece of bread.

Her father began to say something, but he too was burning. Marie rushed from her seat over to him, put her hands on his shoulder, and whispered, "*Don't, don't, don't,*" and the flames died down, but then her brother screamed. She threw a glass of apple juice in his face. Behind her, the dog exploded like a firework, and flames raced up a curtain. She rushed from one place to another, trying to put the flames out one way or another, but soon the whole house was genuinely on fire and she heard parts of it crashing down upstairs.

It was only by the utmost effort, drawing on all the power of her many dreams, her prior adventures, what had been called her witchcrafts, on all the secrets and spells and powers she had learned or gained on other worlds among eternal stone gods, that she *almost* got things under control, and once more the walls and all else were covered only with the faint, unburning, tiny flames that she had spread with her touch. She actually managed to eat some of her dinner. The turkey was especially good, and the sweet potatoes, but she didn't have much appetite, because her parents and her brother sat there like smoldering corpses and the curtain was still burning slowly. She felt her hold slipping, and the flames raced up the curtain again, blackening the ceiling.

She began to sob softly.

That was when someone placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Come away. You know you can't stay here." She heard her *secret* name spoken, the name from her dreams. By that name was she addressed by the two chief men of Chorazin, by Elder Abraham and his assistant, Brother Azrael. She turned in her chair and beheld them. Of course she knew them both. She had known them all her life and had been told that Elder Abraham, the founder of Chorazin and father of the people, was a thousand years old. She believed it. She had no reason to doubt. She knew how time in Chorazin could slip like someone trying to climb a muddy slope. Now the two of them stood before her. The Elder wore a black robe and carried a staff with a glowing stone on the end of it. The Brother wore a suit of an unfamiliar cut.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said.

“I want to stay home.” “You can’t,” said the Elder gently. “You know how this has to end.”

“Yes, I do,” she said at last.

The whole house shook as part of the roof must have collapsed into the second story.

“That being the case,” said Brother Azrael, “we’d better go.”

She let them lead her out of the house. They let her stand for a while, weeping, as it burned and collapsed into rubble.

Then, part way down the path to the main road, they met a boy who looked to be in his middle teens—starting to get tall, no beard yet. She could see him clearly by the glare of the fire. He was naked but for a very short pair of cut-offs, as if he were planning to go swimming, and she could tell that he was also very dirty, streaked with mud. He looked cold. He was hugging his shoulders. She did not know him. She had never seen this particular boy before, but she knew exactly what he was. Always in Chorazin there is one called the Muddy Man or the One Who Goes Below or by various other names, who swims through the earth as if through water, as witches do, who can go deep down into the darkness to converse with buried ancestors or with gods, and bring up treasures. But the Muddy Man she was used to was a long-limbed, gnarled fellow named Enoch, in his sixties or seventies, with wild hair and matted beard, who favored a leather loincloth.

This had to be the latest of his successors. Of his many successors.

She understood that in the actual life she had lived, in her girlhood, this boy and she had never been contemporaries. Of course she didn’t know him. Time was tricky like that, in Chorazin.

They all walked a ways in silence, through the graveyard, past where bones dangled from trees and rattled in the wind, to that place of standing stones and a stone altar. There the Elder removed his robe and placed it on the altar, and stood naked but for a leather loincloth. Marie remained as she was. Her clothes would be ruined, no doubt, but it didn’t matter. She wasn’t coming back. She understood that much.

His staff in his left hand, Elder Abraham took the boy by the hand with his right. The boy in turn took Marie-*who-had-another-name* by the hand, and as Brother Azrael chanted slowly, invoking the Hidden Gods Below,

the three of them, the Elder, the boy, and Marie, sank down into the ground, the mud closing over them like quicksand. The Brother's voice followed them for a long time. She was not afraid. She had known too many miracles to be surprised that they could somehow breathe, or that they didn't have to breathe, even as the boy led them, as all three of them swam, hand-in-hand, down and down into the darkness, until the dead of many generations surrounded them like curious fishes, and she met her mother and father again, and even her brother John, who, she learned, had lived to be seventy-four, until a mule kicked him in the face and he died, in 1917. It was an intense, sweet reunion, as they tried to share all their lives, all their dreams, and there was even laughter, then sadness, and she knew she had to go on.

Down they went, again, until things like skeletal whales rose up out of the earth and swarmed around them. Down, until the solidity of matter itself became as tenuous as smoke, and she saw stars, and a blackness before them, opening up. Shapes loomed before them, speaking with voices deeper than thunder, in words no human tongue had ever formed, and they called out her secret name.

The Elder and the boy—whose name was Jerry, Jeroboam, actually—could proceed no further. The rest of the journey was for her alone. She took her leave of them. At the very end the Elder said to her, in the wisdom of his thousand years, "All these things have been only a gestation. It is nearly complete. Go."

All these necessary things. Everything she had lost.

* * *

Then her eyes were fully opened and her mind cleared, and she remembered, not as if awakening from a dream, but as if she were living it again *right now*, how when she was thirteen years old her parents had taken her out into the night and held her naked on the stone altar like a sheep to be slaughtered. Elder Abraham and the Brother were there, and many others, chanting until their voices were drowned out by thunder and a band of light stretched down from the sky, all the way to this infinite abyss which she now confronted, where even Elder Abraham had not been able

to follow. It touched her inside, filling her, burning. She screamed. She wept. She struggled to get away. But they held her fast.

“Take it,” her father and mother had shouted to her. “Take the flame inside you.”

She felt none of their love now. At that last Thanksgiving, they had loved her. Now their faces and their hearts were hard, as if she had been reduced to the status of a thing—indeed, like a sheep to be slaughtered and as routine as that.

Burning, raging, she broke away, fleeing, to haunt the hills around Chorazin for a century and more.

But even that was only part of the process. The Gestation. Now she entered into the completion of her great task, into her kingdom, to reign as queen.

* * *

These things are true. They are written in the prophetic books Brother Azrael keeps in the locked room in the back of the Chorazin general store. Marie's *other name* is written there by no human hand, in no human tongue. The Gestation is described. Therefore we worship her, as Queen of the Sky, and as Mother of Those Who Are to Come.

The Once and Future Waite

JONATHAN THOMAS

Providence native Thomas has persisted in writing weird fiction amidst (or despite) such diverse livelihoods as postal clerk, artist's model, and percussionist. His titles include Stories from the Big Black House (Radio Void), Midnight Call, Tempting Providence, Thirteen Conjurations, Dreams of Ys and Other Invisible Worlds (all from Hippocampus Press), and The Color Over Occam (DarkFuse). His work has also appeared in Vampirella (Warren), A Mountain Walked (Centipede Press), Innsmouth Nightmares (PS Publishing), and A Darke Phantastique (Cycatrix Press). Naked Revenants and Other Fables of Old and New England appeared in 2017 from Hippocampus Press.



AS IT WAS IN '33, SO IT IS IN '83, UP IN CELL 44 FOR starters, Meg observed ruefully. And our Gothic gingerbread façade has gone decades longer without a facelift, fooling more than one carload of tourists into mistaking the sanitarium for a grand Victorian resort. Well, as “image problems” went, it was unique. Less droll, and much deeper-rooted than quaint brownstone trim, was the Board’s Victorian attitude, but that was a tangent for later.

Cell 44 was the more pressing issue. She wrinkled her nose and shoved her hands into labcoat pockets, as if that would spare them contagion. The wreckage of furniture was gone, the holes in the wall replastered, the fecal smears bleached out, but oh, to open the dormer skylight way up in the steeply slanted ceiling, create a draft, dispel the ambience that transcended mere lingering funk.

The cell’s third patient in as many weeks had spiraled into worse condition than at commitment, suddenly prone to delusions, hallucinations, self-harm, uncannily like his counterparts of fifty years ago. Meg knew what she’d do if she ran the zoo: reseal the cell, stop chucking good money after bad. We were talking single occupancy, one measly bed, and apropos patient outcomes and repair costs, miles past the point of diminishing returns. Better to call it quits, write off the costs of remodeling, updating, swapping out a radiator for baseboard heating.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t her zoo. Should have been, but wasn’t, so the future of Cell 44 wasn’t up to her. The director was the gutless yes-man of new owners, corporate bozos who’d relieved the state of a “money pit” that sank further into the red the more overcrowded it got. And privatization’s cure for fiscal ills? Cram in more beds! Hence Cell 44 was 8 × 10 feet the institute didn’t have before, the overriding priority in the bean-counters’ “big picture.”

Most irksomely, Meg had been tapped to diagnose 44's unwholesomeness and fix it, whereas to anyone who could see beyond short-term windfalls, room for one more, or a dozen more, hadn't a snowball's chance of compensating for federal cuts that forced state governments, already strapped, to foot the care for their psychiatric populations. Fucking Reaganomics!

And lest we forget the patients, bless 'em, what about their quality of life? If indignation had to stand in for compassion—and that was the best Meg could offer—it still counted as patient advocacy, absolutely. The poor souls bunking in 44 had jabbered of harassment by horseflies and yellowjackets that suspiciously vanished whenever staff rushed in. Yet insects had been legion, via the vents or a loose sill around the skylight, on first accessing the room, warranting same-day service from the exterminators.

Mold in those same vents, or fumes from a leaky flue, may have been responsible for crawly figments, and for their conflation into the night-terror described as Rasputin or Svengali or Ayatollah Khomeini, who'd "rejected" the inmates and threatened murder because their brains were "wrong" somehow. At that juncture, middle management ceased shillyshallying and wrangled each inmate space in one of the wards.

Then Meg was lolling in the doorway, with an impression blank-slate minutes had elapsed. She'd zoned out like a senile geezer, might have toppled backward if the doorjamb hadn't stopped her: mold or fumes acting up on cue, as it were. Something noxious was happening in here all right.

The director, whom Meg hated dignifying with so much as a personal name, couldn't even stay off this islet of autonomy, of exile. The cell's air tested negative for spores, carbon monoxide, sundry psychoactive agents, and since 44's influence boiled down to "one of those things" beyond current powers of analysis, she intrepidly argued that official policy was misguided, that reclaiming meager square footage might soon become the institute's own quagmire à la Vietnam.

But no, the director, practically flaunting New Agey tendencies he must have muzzled during his recruitment, exhorted her to delve past the strictly scientific, into anecdotal accounts of 44 and its occupants, into causations more "intangible or oneiric," whatever that meant. She did note

that the newspaper on his desk was folded over to the page with the daily horoscope.

Meg chafed at squandering energy on a fool's errand, but did prefer the paper chase, immersion in research, to interacting with oft-incurable patients. From that angle, she'd be saddled with one fool's errand or another. Still, simply because she lacked the saintliness of Mother Teresa, was she automatically Lucrezia Borgia? How could she help what her forte was?

The director's iffy allegiance to rationalism made it decidedly more galling for the Board to pass her over and hire him "off the street" despite her decade climbing the managerial ladder. Sexism had to be a factor, how onerous in her enlightened field, in these postfeminist '80s! And for bureaucrats bent on pinching pennies, they'd stupidly missed a trick: though discussing salaries was taboo, everyone knew women earned less; promoting her should have been an economic no-brainer. She'd have bowed gladly to the chauvinistic double-standard for the prestige of a directorate.

But seeing as her involvement with 44 might drag on indefinitely, what a godsend she could keep it at arm's length! On numerous occasions he'd sent her to establish "everything was okay" in the cell, without defining "okay." She always spaced out across the threshold, to the extent most recently of an out-of-body experience, snapping out of nothingness to gape at kaleidoscopic mayhem, till a will to focus reduced a hundredfold overlapping honeycomb views to a singular vantage from the skylight down onto 44 and the top of her own twitching head.

Shock zapped her back into herself; for want of objective findings she didn't bother reporting to him, nor did he, out of forgetfulness maybe, follow up with her. Soon afterward she wondered if she'd looked as disheveled exiting the cell as he did when their paths crossed several doors down from 44, his breathing labored, pupils dilated, sweat trickling from blond pompadour. Was his own research into the 8×10 mystery taking its toll, or was he nursing a fern-bar hangover? In any event, served the damn arriviste right.

Meg's first stop on her furlough from hands-on therapy was the basement's "records annex," a parade of green steel filing cabinets probably too close to the steamy boiler room. Down among the dead men, that was

about the size of it, combing the oubliette of a more primitive science's treatment failures. Case histories of 44's last three guests for fifty years substantiated urban legends of a "cursed" asylum cell, as durable locally as the rhyme about Lizzie Borden's "forty whacks." Yesteryear's alienists had concocted a deplorably glib excuse to mothball 44; otherwise, yellowing typescripts accorded ominously with modern circumstances.

From mid-March through April 1933, three consecutive neurasthenics, upper-crust scions who could afford "rest cures" in private quarters, wound up caterwauling deliriously about horseflies and hornets that plunged into their hair, biting and stinging to the death. The patients improved upon relocation, and their doctors never termed the attackers imaginary. Rather, the cell underwent repeated fumigations, back when pest control equaled a spray-pump of Flit.

Official speculation blamed a vagary of the heating system for warm pockets between the joists where vermin spawned or thawed out of season. The same clinicians attributed the escalations from neurosis to mania to those literal gadflies, conceded this front in the war against nature, and walled off the victors. Rasputin and Svengali scored nary a mention, surprisingly.

Further digging revealed a month's vacancy in 44 preceding the neurasthenic trio. And before then? The damp air stuck in her throat and her stomach knotted at an intake of revelation she felt ill-equipped to digest. Since late 1932, 44 had contained another blueblood, Edward Derby, whose brains had been blown out on Groundhog Day 1933. Yes, right in the cell. By a fellow patrician and so-called pal.

Suddenly she had to quash her own lurking irrationality, reject the premise that 44 was haunted or accursed. Shades of *Amityville Horror*, and shopworn ones at that, between assaultive flies and a brutal murder! She reproached herself for adolescent jitters at such B-movie hokum, only to wax emotional again, incensed at the director. No doubt the damn charlatan was exploiting her to confirm, to build upon, his suspicions of 44's occult infestation.

His misuse of her time, of a strapped facility's resources, might already qualify as grounds for dismissal, but let's give him some more rope, make it open-and-shut he was paying her to play ghostbuster. She initiated a detailed log of her excursions in company vehicle plus associated expenses.

If anything, the fun of entrapping the boss made her a more enthusiastic delver, and the lurid spectacle of 44 did exert an undeniable fascination.

The notes on Derby read more like a riddle. His killer, Daniel Upton, was also the prime mover pushing for his committal. Professional consensus had deemed Derby a danger to himself and others, a catatonic depressive prone to violent episodes. Insofar as his ravings were decipherable, he'd suffered delusions his wife was out to enslave or destroy him. After a straitjacketed fortnight, his symptoms went into abrupt remission, and no less baffling, it was on the eve of his release that Upton, his devoted friend and sole visitor, gained after-hours admittance to his cell and murdered him.

Based on these *dramatis personae*, Meg toyed with rivalry over Derby's wife as Upton's motivation. But how did that jibe with the hospital's inability to contact her, the "popular rumor" that the wife, Asenath, had deserted Derby in October and was incommunicado in New York or California? Wherever she was, she clearly wasn't around to "enslave or destroy" him.

Regrettably, case notes didn't provide the background of relationships, the context of crimes, minus which 44 would remain a frustrating puzzle. Assuming Derby and Upton came of newsworthy dynasties, she logged in the hours and mileage for an afternoon at the *Arkham Advertiser*, requesting access at the front desk to the newspaper's morgue. The receptionist, a feathered and frosted '70s holdover, squinched at Meg's workplace ID but still addressed her as "Ms. Kilduff."

"It's 'Doctor,'" Meg patiently corrected, and yes, she did know how to operate a microfiche reader, she'd been to college. The receptionist recommended somewhat tartly she keep her coat on. The morgue was in a backroom festooned with cobwebs. The radiators were cold, though the windows shook with December gusts. The staff left her on her own: the honor system, or the apathy of world-weary hacks?

The more she unearthed, the more her confusion mounted. Derby's homicide was duly bruited, but not as front-page headlines, which were split between Hitler flouting the Treaty of Versailles and carnage at another asylum, outside Cleveland, where nine inmates, rescued from a burning structure, sprinted back inside to self-immolation. Whether cronyism,

solicitude, or incompetence consigned hometown drama to page 5, Meg transcribed plenty to whet the director's appetite for weirdness.

Item, Daniel Upton freely professed pulling the trigger but refused to sign a confession, and was himself slated for psychiatric assessment, because he insisted he'd shot someone else, Derby having died a day earlier.

Item, dental records confirmed that viscerously corrupt human remains, shoveled from Upton's vestibule on the morning of the shooting, belonged to Derby's wife Asenath, née Waite. This bombshell was unceremoniously tacked on, connected only by proximity to the foregoing text.

Item, police discovered the semblance of a disturbed grave in the cellar at Derby's address, with traces of decomposed human tissue within and around it. Derby's former servants were being sought for questioning.

Meg clucked at this textbook classism. Was Derby's pedigree so rarefied as to suspend him above the law? Why wasn't he a "person of interest," deceased or not, who'd wound up in 44 by dint of guilt or angst over slaying and cellaring the wife, assuming those graveside traces were hers? How her liquefying residue had traveled to Upton's doorstep was beyond Meg, especially as Derby had been *hors de combat* that evening—but did that justify the kneejerk association of some poor laid-off domestics with a capital crime?

All water under the bridge now, she shrugged, and irrelevant, what with ample scuttlebutt to sell the director on Derby as the tragic specter in the cell, whether positing a love triangle or not behind madness and double murder. During Meg's departure through the lobby, the receptionist piped up, "Any luck, Ms. Kilduff?"

Without pausing, Meg half turned and riposted, "That's *Doctor* Kilduff." Why was her title so difficult to swallow, most lamentably among women, who ought to applaud the loudest at gender-barrier breakthroughs in male-overrun careers? That is, unless the receptionist was feigning cretinism out of petty jealousy . . .

When Meg had typed up her findings, tendered them along with an oral summation, and joshed, "From what I've gathered, then, you'd have to pin Cell 44's unpleasantness on Edward Derby's ghost," the director, to her chagrin, didn't act a bit amused. He drummed his fingertips in series on the desk, his expression dour, disappointed, coyly patronizing. Was he about to

upbraid her for unseemly frivolity? Or assert the reality of this *Amityville* bushwah from his bully pulpit?

Oh, for a hidden tape recorder as he prattled, “Derby? He fancied himself among the smart set. No, Doctor, you’ve neglected to account for the apparition likened by three witnesses to Svengali, someone entirely dissimilar to Derby.” Meg hunted in vain for any telltale body language to signal he was joshing her back. On the contrary, he enjoined her to trawl deeper into basement and municipal archives. And a positivity in his manner conveyed that he more than suspected occult activity in 44, that he was principally eager for her to duplicate his own findings.

A quaver broke into his equipoise, though, a crack in his executive façade. Without budging, he appeared to shrink away, to cringe from remembered distress, reprising that same routed aspect he’d worn after exiting 44. He stood up a tad unsteadily, as if unused to his own weight, a gesture plainly announcing the interview was over, but wherein she also decoded a vibe of supplication, a mortified plea to prove he wasn’t crazy. Too bad she was itching to prove the opposite, and in tandem she’d gratify, maybe even exorcise, her own gauche curiosity about 44’s penny-dreadful saga.

She harbored misgivings toward becoming one more chapter of that saga herself in the wake of the Christmas Eve party. The “Events Committee” had banished patients from the solarium for the duration—not that anyone gravitated there after dark, where chill airstreams whistled through rattling windows on the sunniest afternoons. Before waltzing in, she checked her makeup in the employees’ ladies room, and sure, she looked fine, but why the hell was the onus on her to “look fine” when male colleagues seldom did? There was that double standard again, and what choice but to fish or cut bait?

She always felt extra grubby after braving the humid squalor down in the “records annex,” fretting over fly-away curls and runny eyeshadow, for all that the mirror showed nothing amiss. She’d heeded the director’s request to pore over files pre- and postdating 1933, and had dredged up developments startling enough that she plowed past the roomful of cocktail klatches to brief him, scorning etiquette against shoptalk on a purely social occasion, and on a Friday yet.

First off, there was a striking absence of material. Though police had, according to the *Advertiser*, remanded Daniel Upton to the sanitarium for evaluation after shooting his “best friend” and then claiming him an impostor, no dossier on Upton came to light, neither where it should have been nor wherever Meg second-guessed it had been misfiled. Had Arkham’s old-boy network expunged the family disgrace of paperwork regarding madhouse internment, or had it altogether circumvented the formality of an evaluation and criminal prosecution? Unbelievable but not surprising!

More momentous were those siftings from the 1920s in which she gleaned the surname “Waite,” doubtless kin to Asenath Derby “née Waite,” a denizen of 44, naturally, and in for psychosis, delusion, and “dementia praecox,” no less. Curiouser and curiouser, he was labeled “late of Innsmouth,” someplace unfamiliar, though Meg grew up a townie and swore she knew every jerkwater statewide, till some trivia bobbed to the surface of her memory: yeah, Innsmouth was that hamlet smashed to flotsam by the Hurricane of ’38, MIA like Atlantis.

As for this “Ephraim Waite,” of age vaguely “over 65,” Meg was agog to learn he’d died of heart failure after several days under restraint, ranting nonstop how he was really Asenath, how his “own father Ephraim” was going to kill him. Here was a mind-boggle an order of magnitude beyond one overbred Brahmin blasting another.

Meg struggled to marshal the facts. An elderly father dies raving he’s his own daughter. A few years pass, and the father’s son-in-law, who if Dad’s rants were to be humored hadn’t really married Asenath because she was dead already in the guise of Ephraim, is murdered by his “best friend” on the grounds he, in turn, was “someone else.” Meanwhile Asenath, or at least her physical portions, had fetched up, execrably decomposed, on Upton’s doorstep.

And what of that “someone else” whom Upton snuffed? The “Rasputin” or “Ayatollah” tormenting latter-day patients was, by default, a match for Ephraim, also ensconced in 44. Was he the culprit the director had cajoled her to track down, whose postmortem influence the director wanted her to validate, independent of his inspired hunches or Ouija-board sessions?

If so, his high-strung, aversive behavior in the context of 44 insinuated he despaired as much as hoped that she’d fulfill his expectations. Bringing

up Ephraim might well do a number on him, undermine his beleaguered faith in rational causality, render his leadership eminently impeachable should he act upon what he patently deemed wrong with 44. Therefore Meg was dying to collar him at the party, hit him with information to widen the cracks in his veneer of stability, inaugurate the glorious process of ousting him.

But in the seconds she expended crossing the solarium, the director, as if on to her nefarious designs, ladled two cupfuls of eggnog, set his back against the wall by the nearest doorway, and pressed a cup upon her as she approached and opened her mouth. She hated eggnog. Her finger hooked reluctantly around the cup's glass handle as if around the ring of a grenade, and her meticulously phrased come-on misfired, her tongue tripping clumsily over upstart substitutions.

"Doctor, doctor," he chided, with unsobber lapses in modulation, "let's not be workaholics. Nothing's so urgent you can't save it till after the long weekend." Had what she'd said even registered? His eyes roved hither and yon as if surveying *terra incognita*. She hadn't begun to regroup when he lunged at her quick as instinct and grabbed her free hand in his, gingerly yet tenacious. "Relax, let your hair down, don't be too anxious to dredge up the past." He slurped some eggnog with a gusto that begged the question of how much he'd already had.

Did people change when they drank or become more bluntly who they were? From Meg's position the issue was academic, as she more crucially debated whether he was evolving into a father-figure or a lech. Or both? Either way, his was now a grayer, more overbearing presence, in contrast to the mealy-mouthed yuppie.

Suddenly psychoanalytic musings were over, as he dumbfounded her with a curt but impactful kiss, the tip of his tongue sketching lightning-strokes across her upper and lower lips. And before she could jerk away, he'd flicked his tongue as rapidly around the inner rim of her ear. The hell of it was, his transgression smacked of clinical efficiency, as if it were exploratory and not amorous, to identify the taste of her lipstick, her earwax.

Then lo and behold, personal space lay between them, and he'd unhand her. She'd been unaware of breaking free, but her cup was half-empty and a white splotch at her feet further insulted the downtrodden

blue carpet. Her skin crawled with the cold eggnog that had sloshed over her fingers, adding drop by drop to the obscene spatter.

She was still dumbfounded when the director raised his cup with a flourish, as if acclaiming a greater power than them both, toward the mistletoe dangling from the doorway lintel behind them. And just like that she should excuse the inexcusable, on the strength of some démodé Yule custom? A toxic little twig taped to the molding granted carte blanche? Would that sexual harassment was a crime!

Yet if it were, rallying witnesses would have been a thorough bust. The party carried on oblivious to his liberties. At least nobody acted the wiser. The in-house microclimate of austerity conferred a free pass; rank-and-file whistleblowers were shoo-ins for downsizing. She retrained her sights on where the boss had been, but he'd repaired to the punchbowl, sparing them both the effort of pretending nothing had happened. She ditched her cup behind a tabletop poinsettia and unsullied her knuckles with a candy-striped paper napkin. Deliberately or not, the smarmy SOB had sidestepped her opening salvo.

Her purported "holiday weekend" was a stint in limbo, tinder-dry Xmas turkey with the folks, bachelorette quarters by her lonesome. No biggie, she didn't need a man underfoot to feel complete, he'd only pose a distraction, an impediment to her career trajectory. She'd have preferred clocking in Monday, furthering her agenda, instead of stewing at home over how the boss had violated her, how dealing with his phantasmal hobbyhorse was in effect marginalizing her. The longer she was absent from her therapeutic rounds, her supervisory role, the better his case for touting her redundancy, how everyone got along splendidly without her.

Maybe that wasn't his premeditated endgame, but to presume the lightbulb of opportunism wouldn't brighten above his head was totally naive. Beneath his bonhomie, he couldn't have liked her any more than she liked him. To get the goods on him first was only prudent. What's more, his physical advances were also in themselves a bid to marginalize her, weren't they, to devalue her credentials and talents, reduce her to an object of exploitation? It wasn't even as if he desired her. There was manifestly no "chemistry" between them.

True to cynical prediction, Meg uncovered neither police nor courthouse records referring to Derby's murder after Upton's arrest, or to

Asenath's presumptive murder at all. The longer she tilled that fallow soil, though, the more damning a waste of funds she'd rack up to convince the Board of directorial incompetence. Which wasn't to say her pulse didn't quicken at learning an Edward Derby Upton had posted bail for Daniel Upton, that surname's final official mention for the decade. The surety bond listed Edward Derby Upton as son, clearly an adult son, if just by a year or two.

And so it was. Edward Derby and Daniel Upton really must have been best pals, for Upton to name offspring after him. That offspring's DOB would have been 1912 or earlier, putting his dad's DOB circa 1890 at the likely latest; Meg didn't bother chasing down a death certificate for Daniel, who'd be in his nineties anyway. But his son? She may have hooked a live one here, a mere septuagenarian who might be around to shed some clarity on this sordid mess.

Praying the apple had rolled no great distance from the tree, she consulted property tax rolls in City Hall. God's unparalleled, or perhaps ironic, level of cooperation floored her. Edward Derby Upton had paid his first-quarter bill for 1982, then sold posh Saltonstall Street digs, with a forwarding address at the Pickman Wing, Arkham Sanitarium. Her buoyant "aha moment" instantly deflated. On the face of it he couldn't have been more accessible, had escaped her attention only because the Pickman Wing maintained its own semi-autonomous files and bureaucracy.

Unfortunately, it did so because it specialized exclusively in long-term geriatric and dementia care, in essence a nursing home within an asylum. He resided a minute from her office, but very possibly nonverbal light-years away. For the Pickman to cultivate a separate identity, to foster the pretense that nobody was consigning dotty Grandpa to the nuthouse, made good business sense. To that end, different entrances served "nursing home" and "nuthouse," but the two were otherwise peas in one brick-and-brownstone pod, aside from the Pickman's profusion of wheelchairs and arrhythmic pings of monitors and infusion pumps.

At first glance, Edward Derby Upton looked okay. Meg would have been taken aback, given his relatively tender age, had he been hooked up to machinery. The nurses' station yielded a basic history of commitment by his lawyer, pursuant to instructions in a living will. Edward was unmarried, no instate relatives, no visitors, period. His chart described rapidly

progressive Alzheimer's. Nightstand and dresser were devoid of keepsakes, books, photos, the slightest personal touch. The weak sheen of winter daylight from the window lent the furnishings their closest approximation to particularity.

Edward's façade of normalcy, his ruddy complexion, Waspy Izod apparel, dignified posture in his Scotchgarded armchair, filled Meg with malaise when she realized he was beaming through her, not at her. Leaning in, she also realized his underwear needed changing. She toughed it out, though, gently persisting that afternoon and twice more that week at chipping past his opacity—in part, she owned bleakly, because his remove from her, his unresponsiveness, promoted the awful feeling she wasn't there either.

She sure as hell didn't go to the director for advice, or even fess up about the younger Upton's existence. No guarantees the boss wasn't a step ahead of her, of course. Nor was it incumbent on the nurses to keep tabs on his unscheduled comings and goings. Meanwhile, she'd gotten nowhere fishing for Upton's lucidity with the bait of his name, former address, a tally of kinfolk, front-page news from his youth. When a swing revival band, replete with crooner, commenced blatting in the refectory opposite Upton's door, Meg was tempted to cry uncle: swing was about as irksome to her as intractable catalepsy.

She couldn't picture amplified hokum, or chamber music for that matter, exerting a salutary effect in her more volatile wards, and what arrant spendthrift had rubber-stamped this extravagance? She was further skeptical about the unvetted good of "music therapy" among the frail and vegetative, and aghast at the crooner's poor taste in mauling "Thanks for the Memory" in front of dementia patients.

But loath as she was to embrace anecdotal evidence, how not to marvel, even if it were coincidence, at droopy eyelids popping open like window shades, palsied lips trembling to break the seal on long-hoarded answers? "Dad never rested too easy about killing him." Huh? Here was a glaring non sequitur in relation to the memories she'd tried evoking, but damned if it wasn't a gold strike, and she gratefully ran with it.

"Who? Edward Derby? Your dad killed him?"

Upton's focus drifted as if in confusion at whether she meant him or his namesake. Then he huffed, "No, no. Ephraim. Would a bullet in the head

finish him? That fool Derby kept on ticking in his wife's remains after he split her skull himself. And it was Ephraim put him in Asenath's corpse and took over Derby's body in the booby hatch, where Dad put Derby."

Meg squelched a graceless urge to ask where Upton thought he was, if not in that selfsame "booby hatch." Branding him a "two-faced Yankee" was off the mark, said more about her prejudices than about him. But he was the study subject here, and to hear him tell it, round-robin metempsychosis had bedeviled his dad's social circle. Well, as group hysterias went, it was original enough, unless it were wholly Upton's unhinged invention. "So you're telling me Ephraim possessed his son-in-law's body after the son-in-law had murdered Ephraim's daughter Asenath? And then your dad killed Ephraim, inside Derby's body?"

"Or did he?" Upton retorted, rather archly for a senile codger.

"Who else could Ephraim possess? Your dad?"

"Hah! Dad swore they'd never get him within a mile of the booby hatch again, and it cost him dear to swing that. Didn't begrudge a penny of it either, not as events panned out. It was quite the public secret how the lunatics left Derby's old cell a damn sight worse than they went in. The whitecoats got sick of it, blocked it up, and should've done sooner. They wouldn't own up that Ephraim was still around, though the schoolgirls had a jump-rope ditty to that effect."

"Did anybody in the cell claim to see Ephraim?"

"Nope, but he was somebody who'd haunt a house, a great one for whammies and hoodoo. Nobody'd look him in the eye when he came to town. He was supposed to have died in the asylum ages before, but people fancied that was just his body, and his spirit lived on in his daughter." Meg had nodded politely through plenty of elaborate delusions, but this one's convolutions were giving her a headache.

"Wait a second," she enjoined, hard-pressed to retain her footing in the slipstream of blather. "We're talking about personalities jumping from body to body. But where was Ephraim's personality when the cell was empty? Why didn't he stick with any of the inmates when they left the cell?"

"Because he was never in any of them. Dad blew his brains out. A soul would need a while to pull itself together after that. But Ephraim had no shortage of temporary shelters, back before your modern sanitation. The punier the brain, the better. Ephraim was the type to go bite a person on

the scalp if he couldn't get in his head otherwise, and that was why Dad hated bugs and such, had a flyswatter on him always and mousetraps on the floor, as if vermin could hop a bus from the asylum clean over to our place."

He chuckled at Dad's silliness, though nothing shy of vermin riding the bus had heretofore struck him as too fantastical. And now he was gawking at her. Dammit, she must have dropped her professional guard. Luckily, he mistook her bemusement for stodgy wits. "Don't get it, do you? The little girls understood. 'Ephraim didn't want to die, He went into a fly, The fly got eaten by a spider, So he went inside her, She got eaten by a rat, So he went inside of that . . .' That's what they used to sing, eh?"

Meg essayed a brittle smile. She appreciated his clever ploy of recruiting Depression-era kids to validate his gibberish, but it only helped persuade her he belonged in her wing of the institute—not that poaching Pickman "clients" was on her to-do list. If anything, she was more uncomfortable with an Upton intense instead of comatose, and how would this manic phase play out? She'd already elicited details galore to jot down while they were fresh, to collate with the story so far, to fuel the director's budding irrationality.

Speaking of whom, it behooved her to ascertain, while Upton was in so expansive a mood: "Edward, has anyone else stopped by to ask about your dad and Cell 44?"

A cogent, searching expression gave way to alarming blowup. "I'm not here!" Vocal exertion picked him up off his seat and plunked him down again. "He comes back, mark me AWOL! He's a wall, Kilroy's behind him, never went away, shit-eating nose flopping over the top! Kilroy was here, man the pumps! Quick anyone, the Flit!" Upton shuddered crown-to-toe, eyes darting fitfully, fists beating a paradiddle on his chair's wooden arms. "He comes buzzing around, here's some food for thought!"

Meg gagged and sprinted to the nurses' station, barely pausing to announce, "Edward Upton's had an accident. He needs an immediate change of clothing. He may be unruly." A classic Ratched of a brickhouse nurse raised wire-thin eyebrows that projected, *Who the hell are you?* "I'm your deputy managing officer," Meg grated. "I'm Dr. Kilduff." Her parting glower intimated the plebs had better snap to it or else, while the dining-hall crooner warbled, "You must remember this . . ." Jesus Christ, what was

wrong with that Kmart Sinatra? Or did she have him to thank, however ill-advised his repertoire, for defrosting Upton?

She typed up Edward's remarks from behind a locked office door, as if merely recording them implied belief in them, impugning her own *mens sana*. Worse, she couldn't just transcribe mechanically, no; compulsive riffing on Upton's drivel ensued, inducing her to repeat, I'm going through the motions of buying into nonsense, that's all, strictly for the sake of argument. She wouldn't, for example, commit to typescript her surmise that a human personality could scarcely hope to interface with arthropod brains for fifty years, for thousands of evanescent generations, with nothing rubbing off on it.

And Upton's wild aversion to "Kilroy"—did that derive entirely from turbid flashbacks to wartime experiences, or could she read into it a chat with the director gone awry? If so, Upton might also have treated him, before their tête-à-tête imploded, to his folderol about Ephraim cheating death by taking refuge in vermin. In which case, would the director be dippy enough to apply that folderol to the problem of 44? It was something for Meg to look forward to. Or if he was unacquainted with "Kilroy," fine, she'd have the pleasure of catching him up.

She traipsed into his office as smug and self-possessed as proverbial Greeks bearing gifts, though not without trepidation. It was almost mid-January, and she hadn't been alone with him since his Yuletide hijinks under the mistletoe. At the threshold she noticed he'd cranked the thermostat; she couldn't be this hot under the collar in the span of seconds from her own emotional state. It was steamy greenhouse heat, conducive only to orchids and the insects nibbling them.

The director had his back to her, and when she cleared her throat and clacked her hard heels across the parquet, he about-faced from the nor'easter out the window, wide-eyed as if he hadn't a clue what snow was. "Well, they were forecasting upwards of a foot overnight," she greeted him.

He muttered, "They . . ." He seemed perplexed at who "they" were, disoriented, untethered from the present. Fits and starts of recognition blinked into his vision, and finding her already seated in the chair toward which he waved, he spouted, "Please make yourself at home. What have you got?"

She adhered to the custom of winging an oral summation while he, at his desk, skimmed from page to page. In brief, yes, he'd been right, a patient other than Edward Derby was the prime candidate for haunting 44. Ephraim Waite, a crackpot infamous for meting out the hairy eyeball and worse witchery, had also died there, and in yet another incredible coincidence, would have become Edward Derby's father-in-law a few years later. The director's brow wrinkled, probably at the paragraph about straitjacketed Ephraim raving he was his own daughter.

Meg had, she reminded him, tried imparting all this at the staff party, but just as well she hadn't, because today a fascinating, albeit ridiculous, new rationale for the tribulations in 44 had emerged. A syllable wedged in her throat when the director's eyes met hers with a flinty, piercing appraisal. In a flash it was over and he reverted to clinical dispassion; her sangfroid recovered and she forged on, though she'd never resolve whether her oblique allusion to his tipsy behavior, or her unprofessionalism in labeling Ephraim a "crackpot," had annoyed him.

At any rate, Ephraim wasn't exactly haunting the cell, as she'd prematurely espoused, so much as transplanting himself in the myriad critters infesting it, sustaining his consciousness for decades till reopening the cell last month brought human brains to infiltrate. These violations, unsuccessful to date, translated among the victims as harassment by Rasputin or the Ayatollah. How formidable Ephraim must have been to inspire that range of comparisons! And none other than Daniel Upton's only son, right under our noses in the Pickman, had concocted this most abstruse, outlandish explanation for a cell's poor health-and-safety profile.

The director's swivel chair squealed and twisted some degrees, he slid an inch to one side on its cushion as if nudged, and his studied reserve sharpened into hawkish interest. Optimistic Meg strove for an air of neutrality while yearning for hairline cracks in his composure, for a tic of credulity toward Edward Upton's hogwash. That hogwash was perturbing him all right, but in a scarily uncharted direction.

He smacked her papers down on his desk and snatched his fingertips away as if expecting they would stick. With a steely, domineering attitude quite unlike him, and diction the more chilling for its quiescence, he demanded, "Why was I not informed?" More disconcerting yet, his sightline had lowered toward the emptiness between them, fostering a

notion he wasn't addressing her. And in more daunting proof the cracks were spreading, his eyes goggled unblinking and he succumbed to herky-jerky spasms, switching his head left-right-left with a vigor liable to sprain his neck. She had a firm but arbitrary inkling the two conditions were linked, the spasms somehow contriving to restore, or recalibrate, his vision.

The spasms persisted till a string of spittle spewed past the dam of his clenched teeth, to zigzag across the desk and her topmost sheet. She winced as his head wrenched to a jarring halt, and went cold at the same leer he'd fixed on her at the party. It partook of nothing amorous but was no less carnal, and unnerving, for that. She felt unsafe as she never had among the garden-variety maniacs. In the fewest words, she felt like food. Her feet were fidgety with the stirrings of fight-or-flight response. Damn her smartass resolution to knock him off his high horse!

If he began heaving from his chair, would it be to gesture her out, or pounce? Meg was on hair-trigger alert, tensing to take to her heels, and fuck it if that made her seem the crazy one. "Will you excuse me?" he murmured at torturous length, a sheath of whisper around an iron imperative. "I have much to pore over, Doctor. Thank you." She nodded warily and hustled out, not quite bolting, declining to dwell on his borderline sardonic enunciation of "Doctor."

She retreated to her office, not far enough down the hall, and resisted a batty impulse to barricade herself in. For one thing, she'd be signing out within the hour, and in view of the snow pelting diagonally through the cones of light from the Victorian lampposts along the drive, absconding sooner sounded wise. The two-lane blacktop into town might already amount to a slip-'n'-slide enlivened by dead-man's curves, and the rusty old truss bridge over the Miskatonic had been slick with pre-snowfall rime this morning.

She just couldn't disengage, though, from bureaucratic futzing with weekly treatment reports, staff performance reviews, the tedium she'd ordinarily dash into a blizzard to avoid. Nebulous forebodings about the boss held her deskbound, needled her into reviewing their fraught discussion, deconstructing his strangeness. His alienation from the world outside, his mood swings into a starker personality, his fleeting but trenchant interrogation of an impalpable third party, the psychic upheaval underlying his frothing convulsions—these were helter-skelter signposts to

an overlapping pair of propositions: Ephraim had invaded the director's head, or more realistically, the director thought he had.

She could readily credit the power of autosuggestion to possess him. He'd been receptive to a supernatural basis for the cell's toxicity from the get-go, and once the option of naming that basis "Ephraim" became available, the director seemed unable to breeze into 44 without absorbing more and more of him. And the independence of that persona had evolved to the extent "Ephraim" wasn't automatically privy to whatever the director knew. Edward Upton, for example, apparently hadn't been on "Ephraim's" radar until Meg had inserted him there.

Her forebodings redoubled at grasping how she may have blundered terribly, how she may have painted a bull's-eye on Edward Upton's chest. Meg couldn't rule out an Old Testament attitude toward "sins of the fathers" between the director's ears, whoever was in there. That must have been why her better nature hadn't let her clock out. She'd be indirectly, a.k.a. morally, responsible for the deadly vengeance "Ephraim" might wreak on the son of the man who'd slain him.

Out of habit she'd kicked off her pumps under the desk, no use on her own turf for that further inch of stature, that extra stab at prettifying herself for the banal menfolk. Her arches always smoldered and ached by four o'clock. Urgency launched her up and out in her nylon-stockings feet to the Pickman; who the hell could run in those heels?

Shortcuts through derelict service tunnels and up equally grungy stairwells brought her, winded and sweaty, to the nurses' station, where she vowed heads would roll. The day shift had jumped the gun at prospects of whiteout conditions, while the night shift, battling those conditions, had yet to materialize. Nobody was in sight beyond a scatter of patients drooping inert in wheelchairs or soaking up blue glow in the TV lounge. What a conducive interlude for a murder!

The blips and pings of monitors and palliative equipment made her feel like a pinball as she careened down the hall into the room where Upton wasn't, where the absence of anything personal had become his absence, period, nothing to show he'd ever been there, unless those were his gobs of blood on which she skidded. No blood, no indicators of violence had caught her eye outside the room, not that she ever doubted the director was cunning and careful.

Those qualities were on further display in his office, where no souvenirs of mayhem met her frantic survey. Not till she turned to go did she discover the smeary footprints she'd tracked from Upton's room; they flustered her as if guilt at exposing him were taking graphic form.

She could conceive of only one more destination in the whole sanitarium. And the air in 44, at first haggard gasp, was easier to breathe, less burdensome, as if an oppressive element had departed. Moreover, she didn't have to throw the light-switch on her way in. Via the skylight an ashen glow suffused the cell, a protrusion of the white overcast, not so much converting night to day as exchanging mundane reality for its darkroom negative. No gore bespattered walls and floor, and maybe anxiety induced her to imagine the air growing thick and stifling again as footfalls clomped brashly down the corridor.

She pressed her spine against the wall beside the door, her best impromptu measure to "play it safe," and a heartbeat later, the director snuffled in, bent so low he verged on toppling over, knuckles almost sweeping the floor, smudging the bloody trail he ogled with bulging eyes, his nostrils flaring. Blood encircled his lips like clown makeup. Was he on her scent or Upton's?

She had no inclination to find out. The instant his momentum carried him past her into the cell, a pace or two from where her red footprints U-turned toward the threshold, she sidled out and slammed the door, and hurray, the key was in the lock. Her respiration had yet to quiet down when caterwauling from the cell fazed her all over again. "Don't put me in here with him! Open that door! I'm your superior!" she deciphered amid more garbled uproar. Ah, but even had she been more sympathetically disposed, 44 was the sole single-occupant vacancy tonight.

Breathing exercises gradually recouped her the wherewithal to look around. A gaggle of nurses and orderlies had assembled in response to the director's ruckus, or to her footprints maybe, and was giving her wide berth, waiting on her to open her mouth, as if to ensure she wasn't the one who needed confinement. At least she had a rank-and-file who wouldn't desert the snowed-in ship, unlike those shirkers in the Pickman.

She kept it simple, loud and clear to cut through the hysterics. The director has suffered a breakdown. He's likely murdered someone. You, you, and you, call the police, call an ambulance, don't let anyone into 44 who

isn't armed, he's extremely dangerous. The rest of you, search for the body of an Edward Upton, include the Pickman Wing, inform anyone who answers the phone over there that he's missing. And all the while the ear-splitting protests raved on, very disruptive to linear cognition, "He'll cast me out! He'll force me into one of them! He'll make me what he is!"

Messengers soon reported back with body language entreating her not to shoot them please. The roads were bad, the bridge impassable due to a ten-car pileup, long story short, no cops, no medics, we're on our own till morning. Meg wryly considered the drivers might have been Pickman commuters fecklessly outbound or valiantly inbound, perchance colliding head-on. Her verbal reaction was a model of philosophic reserve: don't beat yourselves up, we can muddle through for a lousy twelve hours, can't we?

Internally she was basking in the Schadenfreude. She'd proved the director unfit for duty, what a glaring understatement, never mind her active role in rendering him unfit. Here was simply the outcome of subscribing to half-baked New Age thinking, daily horoscope, ghosts, the twaddle that softened him up, made him a sitting duck for cruel-world stressors. On perceiving she'd been tuning out his hysterics, becoming desensitized, she told the flinchy doormen she'd be in her office. She could sack out on the futon and trust that anyone who sniffed out Upton's corpse was competent to locate her too.

The dazzling sunshine of a post-nor'easter freeze poured between the slats of her venetian blinds and jarred her awake. She was irrationally nonplussed not to hear the director's screams and, even at a stone's throw from 44, strained her ears to no avail. Nothing disrupted the snores of the night watch, who'd been conscientious enough to plunk his ass squarely in front of the door.

She shook his shoulder, he shuddered and listened and asked, somewhat obtusely on first impression, "Is he still in there?"

"Let's see, shall we?" she urged, already admitting to herself, Yeah, it is uncannily peaceful in there. She had him open up, then waved him aside, preferring to be first to take stock, despite lurking danger, of her campaign's success. True, she couldn't have done it without the snow as collaborator, which thank God was still delaying the arrival of any managerial peers, with whom she was unaccountably reluctant to share this triumph. Meanwhile, she'd become, by default, the acting director!

She tromped in, but before her brain could process visual input, the smell slammed her in the solar plexus, nearly backhanded her out the door. Shit, puke, and death, in descending order, made her tear ducts overflow, dizzied her with nausea, impelled her with brute desperation to focus.

The director had come up with an all-consuming alternative to screaming. He was on hands and knees, naked, clothes in soggy shreds littering the floor, his face in a hillock of his own shit, slurping it up, its contours obscured by the vomit topping it. And in the mucoid vomit were mouthfuls of raw mushy meat, some with milky skin and limb hair still attached, along with several slimy, partly defleshed fingers. If last night's search party had stumbled across other morsels, would it have realized they were Upton's piecemeal remains?

A strangled squawk impinged on her from behind. The big, manly slab of an orderly had peeked over her shoulder and wasn't bracing up especially well. "Keep it together!" she barked, without taking her eyes off the director, who hadn't yet acknowledged them. "It's your job to deal with what's in front of you, is it not?" If he managed to answer, she was deaf to it, intent on a little experiment. "Ephraim?" she accosted the director, though aware she might only establish the director thought he was Ephraim.

But she'd won his attention. His head swiveled toward her, in the fashion of a mantis or wasp; otherwise he didn't budge a muscle. Okay, now what to say? Before anything occurred to her, an impatient buzzing sprang from his throat and he resumed breakfast. Barring a defunct warlock in genuine control, the director really had bought into the implications of Ephraim abiding in a thousandfold generations of vermin, and she had to curb a self-satisfied smirk on mulling the silver lining to this miasma.

The directorship was good as hers, via the one route open to her, and as her mind's eyes lifted toward that busted glass ceiling, her actual eyes hove toward a horsefly on the wall, so incongruous with the snowscape outside, the Arctic draft leaking in from the skylight. The horsefly was inert as if in shock at hatching in this hostile season, or at reflecting, perhaps, it hadn't been a horsefly yesterday?

What a mad supposition, but why leave anything about her elevation to chance, risk defeat bursting from the jaws of victory? The fly might take wing anytime. Meanwhile, the orderly was exerting no more of a presence

than the fly, doubtless praying she'd send him for in-house reinforcements, or to phone the cops, anything to be elsewhere. Fine. She issued her first command as acting director. "Get me a flyswatter, please. Or a rolled-up magazine will do. What are you waiting for?"

He skedaddled, and before smiling more brazenly at the wreckage of her ex-boss, she made a mental note to give her insubordinate drudge a severe dressing down. How dare he look at her sidelong as if she was the crazy one?

Oude Goden

LYNNE JAMNECK

Lynne Jamneck is a fiction writer and editor. She has been nominated for the Sir Julius Vogel and Lambda Awards and holds an M.A. in English literature. Her fiction has appeared in Jabberwocky, H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror, Something Wicked Magazine, Fantastique Unfettered, Unconventional Fantasy: A Celebration of Forty Years of the World Fantasy Convention, and Black Wings of Cthulhu 5. Forthcoming work will appear in Nemesis (Hippocampus Press) and Skelos. She has edited Dreams from the Witch House: Female Voices of Lovecraftian Horror (Dark Regions Press, 2016) and, with S. T. Joshi, Gothic Lovecraft (Cycatrix Press, 2016).



UPITER AND I STARTED OUT AS BEST FRIENDS because I never mocked her for being named after a planet. Her father had been an amateur astronomer, her mother a woman who knew how to pick her battles.

Our bond started as friendship and became devotion. We were never afraid, of anything. I lie awake at night when the darkness gets too close, wishing we had been. Then Jupiter might still be alive and I wouldn't have discovered the world can be a malicious place, dictated as it is by humanity.

The roaring twenties didn't quite make the same noise in Snohomish City as they did in New York and Chicago. Only had about 3000 people at any given time, considering there were always some arriving and others leaving, a trend some people said made us look like a community hellbent on avoiding the looming future.

Snohomish has all the modern conveniences they're so proud of in the northeastern states. And even there, in states like Vermont, it sometimes feels as if you've walked straight into some archaically preserved flood of old things.

Living in a small town has its perks. One being that it's easier to cotton on when something is wrong, even when everyone turns a blind eye.

Also, helps if you're a witch.

I'm a Dutch immigrant on my mother's mother's side, all the way from Roermond, where the family line courses back further than the witch trials of 1613. Even a hundred years earlier, the women of Roermond were already being burned alive for gathering in the woods, shapeshifting into cats, and having sex with the devil.

It sounds outlandish, but a lot of it is true, regardless of how much the Pennsylvania Dutch will try to convince you otherwise. Warped to some degree, possibly. Still. In the current modernity, humanity's first beliefs

have been so watered down they seem perplexing, comical even. What hasn't changed is that the devil is still being blamed for insolence, which is never truer than when a woman's involved.

Call me a devil-child, then. Others have. It doesn't bother me. I've based my entire life on cheek and insolence. That's how I got to know Sidha. A six-foot Rajput who had once been a soldier in the British Indian Army until a bullet took his leg, Sidha owned the big grocery store on First Street, next to the Eastman Dry Plate Company, who still sold their own photographic plates, belligerently staving off that new Kodak company.

It seems whenever they find an opportunity, the rest of Snohomish likes to tell me that a "nice girl like me" shouldn't talk to "dangerous gooks." Snohomish men allowed their wives to buy from Sidha because his produce was the freshest and his meats of an outstanding quality. Insult a man to his face, yes, but pay him well for his capitalist efforts. Sidha didn't care; he laughed at their idiocy.

Also, a nice girl like me shouldn't wear pants. Which I did, along with coarse flannels reserved for men and which were much warmer than a flimsy damned dress during the wet Pacific Northwest winters.

Model Ts were parked on opposite ends of First Street throughout the week except Sunday. Today was Wednesday and I'd been awake since 5:00. Troubled sleep. I get angry each time a mother tells a child to pay nightmares no mind. No wonder so many people grow up unprepared for what they run up against when they're awake.

A small group of young men in scuffed boots and dust-covered overalls stared in agreement as I walked past and into Sidha's store. They're the types who don't like how cities like Seattle are turning into artist-friendly hubs. During the day they intimidate; at night they cover their faces in white hoods, meet at the community hall, and get up to worse.

"Morning." Sidha was behind the shop counter, unboxing something wrapped in several sheets of newspaper, one of which, slowly expanding, read: WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE A VOTE OR A HUSBAND?

"Those boys are still loitering outside in the street. You have to protect yourself, Sidha."

"I shoot anybody in this town I'll be good as dead myself. Don't worry. You and me know how to take care of ourselves."

"I wish Jupiter and I had been more careful." It'd been a few years, but it still stung.

"Jupiter was not your fault."

"And now more of us queers have disappeared. Bobby and Carl who live by the river—I haven't seen them in weeks. And Florence I used to see at least once a week, but it's been a month. They're not my fault either, but if I don't do something about it, I might be next. Then it *will* be my fault."

"You're what my mother would have called 'tenacious.'"

"And my mother probably would've agreed."

In addition to Sidha's groceries, he also traded in more exotic objects. His under-the-counter-business was, however, mainly conducted with the Lushootseed people and, sometimes, visiting Tlingit traders. He had helped me many times, most often to track down books using his vast knowledge of Oriental mysticism. My witch-behaviour often required nothing so much as the right words.

"You seen that cultist arrived on the steamer a few days ago?"

"Sure did. Came in here day before last. Tried to use magic on me, but he ended up messing with the wrong gook." Sidha smiled broadly. "You should have seen his face when I turned his own tricks against him. He started babbling about bananas and billy goats."

"He say anything useful?"

"I think so." Sidha opened his cash register and took out a square of white paper from the drawer. He gave it to me, and I read the word written on it. *Ghatanothoa*.

"Can't say I know what *that* is."

"Me neither."

I shoved the paper in my coat pocket. "Then I'm probably going to need some help."

Sidha reached behind the counter and gave me a transparent phial containing a sinister-looking liquid. "Don't suppose someone's found a way of making this stuff taste better?"

Sidha dismissed my complaint. "Be grateful it's been pulverised into a juice. Seeing that thing in solid form is something you'll never unsee." He reached behind the counter again and placed a scuffed silver flask down in front of me. "Chase it down with a shot of Tlingit moonshine. Destroys

your guts, sure, but it will also annihilate the charred aftertaste. Take it, just pay for the hoodoo.”

Outside in the street the sun bore down and reflected in sharp cuts from bright surfaces. The group of young men had been joined by a counter-cluster of women, playing at a host of tactics to attract male interest. Distracted by my appearance, they stared when I took a pouch of tobacco from my shirt pocket to roll a cigarette, lit it, and proceeded to cross the street, at least one choice bit of calico acting coy when I winked in her direction.

* * *

Ghatanothoa!
The thing with a thousand eyes
Ghatanothoa!
Don't listen to his lies

* * *

I woke with a start, prostrate on an unmade bed. The rest of my body struggled to catch up to my brain, where electricity linked uneasy images from fading dreams, heavy and profuse. Beyond the open curtain twilight set in. New Englanders talk about how whippoorwills make them nervous; they haven't heard the loud and incessant yipping of black-necked stilts, as if disturbed, warning anyone who will listen.

In the kitchen, I took Sidha's phial from the fridge (*slightly* less revolting cold) and brought it with me into the sparsely furnished lounge. My grandmother used to say, "Live thinly, because the world will try to box you in." Along with my parents, *ouma* had been this-world-dead for a long time. Maybe I would see them again tonight.

Like my mother and grandmother and the other *toverdokters* before them, I also had a mascot that made flesh not only my own past, but the histories of generations bound by blood, sacrifice, and community, a curated collective memory. My talisman despised direct sunlight; during

the day, he made me cover the open crate he chose to sleep in with a blanket.

Outside, the last of the sun disappeared behind the horizon. I lit some candles, then gently removed the blanket from the wooden crate.

To the untrained eye, Cornelius was a blue Flemish Giant, a rabbit with a dense, glossy charcoal coat. Inside his skin, however, there resided a *verteller*. Several hundred years ago, Cornelius had been a historian from Ghent, in Belgium. After he died, Cornelius's ghost had been entrusted to recording the occult histories of a witch—me, in his case. Regular history books often leave out very important details.

Cornelius was irritable about being woken up.

"Come on, Rip Van Winkle. We got work to do."

His fur bristled and he curved into a lowdown stretch. The rabbit's hefty ears slowly perked and he eyed me up with his small black eyes. "*Munsterkerk?*" His gravelled voice sounded tight, as if it needed a good stretch too. I sat down cross-legged on the wooden floor. Cornelius hopped down from the table on which his crate stood and settled his furry body in my lap.

"Before we start," I said, "does the word 'Ghatanothoa' mean anything to you?"

He eyed me up again. "Swallow that filthy poison; this is difficult work and I want to get back to sleep."

Curmudgeon.

I tipped the phial against my lips, trying to ignore the grimy texture of the liquid as it steeled under my tongue, where I held it for a moment, giving it time to be absorbed straight into my bloodstream. Soon the concoction initiated its time-altering physics inside my body. There was a viciously sadistic rush as a slew of past events passed through, emotional quantifiers stirring me for seconds only but nonetheless imparting distressing shocks, all of which gave rise to strong nausea in the pit of my stomach. The lounge began axing itself into puzzled sections, devolving into a state that relaxed all known metric requirements; lines curved away from one another and increased in distance, creating an empty-yet-overflowing space, common perpendiculars reshaping into ultraparallels. The omnipresent past bloomed like a million unknown flowers in a

suspended desert, creating a now that was all-encompassing, Cornelius and I its anchors as the bifurcating potion continued to addle my atoms.

We glided through the arched entrance of Roermond's *Munsterkerk*, the cathedral's lengthy Romanesque towers spearing brusquely into a starless sky. At the church altar we were anchored in place. A drawn-out static noise invaded the space, buttressed—one could only imagine—by an ominous, ceaseless void. The tesseract would not hold long. But those I had come to speak to were already there.

Toverdokters. In my reality, they had all long since died; in this world, they offered wisdom to those willing to seek them out.

A disembodied voice expanded within the confines of the church. "Speak fast."

"Someone in my world seeks Ghatanothoa."

"The one that is both," the disembodied voice said.

"Both?"

"Ghatanothoa comes from out the aeons."

"Is Ghatanothoa to blame for those like me disappearing?" I stopped short of asking about Jupiter.

I'd been hoping to see my mother, my grandmother. But the sea of faces before me was already fading. Cornelius was on his hind legs, between my legs, his black eyes twice their normal size. He shook like a child woken from a nightmare. His small body had to handle a lot. Again I was surprised by his absolute strength.

"Ghatanothoa comes when called."

A strong vibration started deep beneath the ground and quickly began bubbling to the surface, juddering the robust walls of the cathedral. I was out of time. "How do I find Ghatanothoa?"

"The Old One can only be found through pain."

Like the walls of my lounge, *Munsterkerk* began breaking down, devolving into a maelstrom of collapsing pews, drifting colonettes, and shattered spinning stained glass. My hand went instinctively to Cornelius, who buried his nose in the hollow of my knee as the temporary construct faded into rapidly diminishing fragments and then—the strong pull of time—disorienting, heart beating hard in my chest followed by—*inertia*! Rigid to the point of mortis and beading sweat from every pore, I stared at the

inside walls of my house, re-forming themselves into my everyday assembly of life.

* * *

The sun was about to rise. I gave Cornelius something to eat and a bowl of hot milk with a dollop of gin, the way he'd liked it in human form.

"Cornelius, when I asked you before, about Ghatanothoa, did you recognise the name?"

"I'm old. I recognise a lot of things. I wanted to hear what the witch-folk said."

"Not a lot that seems helpful right now."

Cornelius eyed me up. "Maybe not yet."

It wouldn't do any good to push him for answers.

"I'm going back to sleep now. Don't wake me." He headed for his crate, stopped, and looked at me, licking his lips in that rabbitty way. "Fine! Stroke my left ear twice from the bottom, to the top."

I did as he instructed.

"Now go to sleep."

So we did.

* * *

Jupiter? Is that you?

She was framed against a black curtain.

What happened? Where are you?

With the Old One. His thousand eyes hold me.

I wanted to get closer to her but the dreamland wouldn't allow it. Why did he take you?

I asked him to. Like the others.

I don't understand.

Ghatanothoa accepts us. Ghatanothoa is balance.

I tried to move again but stayed stuck. I accepted you, Jupiter. We accepted each other.

The black curtain behind her seemed to blink softly; stars taking leave of the sky at the failing dark of night.

I cared about you so much.

Ghathanothoa loves us. The Old Ones seek to restore balance. We were never meant to thrive. Be with us, my love. The priest will show you how to find us.

Something about the dream projection was beginning to feel very wrong. I became aware of a kind of pull inside me, a thing or a thought, like a coiled snake that had been waiting and was now ready to strike.

Leave the pain behind.

I understood then.

But I'm strong, Jupiter.

We can be together.

The black curtain and its brightly glowing points of light abruptly bulged, followed by a sequence of grotesque movements, like a large, struggling upside-down spider. I saw—realised—that they had never been stars, but the stunning gleam of scores of eyes, all now sharply focused on me. Jupiter was pulled into the arachnid-thing's ink-stained folds and no matter how I tried to break free from the force holding me, all my efforts proved futile. The thing's contours began bubbling in a froth of balloon-like aggregations; it twisted and turned and spat as it came closer, and as it continued its march of ever-changing shapes, I distinctly saw that it had both male and female genitalia.

For an instant, I thought I felt the snake strike. I was enthralled by the unexpected beauty of this cosmic intersex life form, a perfect synthesis of universality.

—Like a bolt of lightning, quicker and stronger than the metaphysical serpent within me, some influence yanked me from my stupor. For an instant there was a deep and warm smell, one I associated with my childhood. Ouma's kitchen.

As the lounge with Cornelius's crate approached at speed in the oncoming distance, I slammed into the part of myself that had almost given into temptation. I was intact, outside the dreamlands. More importantly, I was whole.

Once again the Old Ones were setting their sights on us. Manipulating those who lived in fear for their own gain.

Well, not me, godverdomme. Too many witches had been drowned and burned alive with the help of their acolytes, the masses oblivious they were

murdering the only ones able to protect them from cosmic destruction. Whether Ghatanothoa took pain away or not, it still only gave death in return. One, it seemed, in which it fed off the energy of those already taken to reach out to more.

Someone needed to put a stop to its bullshit. Cheek and insolence. That's what we needed. Cornelius was going to be pissed.

* * *

My favourite of the books Sidha had found for me was a collection of verses, captured together under the title *Dhol Chants*. "Captured" in the precise sense of the word; open the book without casting the necessary protective charm and the chants inside can escape, wreaking havoc. This had already happened a few times; no wonder the custodian at Miskatonic had agreed to trade Sidha the original for an excellent reproduction. Students should never be trusted.

Cornelius was on the kitchen table. He'd crawled out of his crate once the sun was gone. "Of course I knew what you'd be up to," he explained, lazily washing his silky ears.

Among the transcribed chants of the Sarkomand men, I found a spell for commanding the priest of a Great Old One. I called the words, making the walls of my little house shudder and shake. An emerald fissure opened in the air, revealing a darkly robed figure, face hidden in a tall cowl. He removed it, revealing a not-ugly face, arrogance reeling off him.

"Ghatanothoa is using you." I said.

His expression revealed surprise. "The brainless witch brought me right to her."

"You like to dance, monkey?"

He laughed; I cringed at the theatrics. Dim-witted moron.

"I saw Ghatanothoa eat the she-goat and all its babies in one mouthful."

"Delicious, but I think I missed the point you're trying to make."

"The dead ones were drawn to Ghatanothoa's deliverance. The Great Old One offers them peace."

The house's walls began to shudder move violently, and I thought to myself, *Please, I need a roof over my head.*

Cornelius was next to me, eyes like rabbit saucers. The cultist had one hand in the folds of his robe, ostensibly seeking out some kind of protection or means to harm me. Whatever his intention, I knew the priest was about to meet deliverance of his own.

The same black curtain that had blocked Jupiter in the dreamlands typhooned into the lounge. From its Stygian depths, a single colossal eye emerged, growing larger until we were squaring off in a petrifying game of rubbernecking. A million thoughts were exchanged between Ghatanothoa and myself. Neither of us could harm the other. But I told it, nonetheless, and it listened. I accepted its existence. It had no power over me.

Ghatanothoa shirked away in a rush of crab-spiderly arrangements, and the leviathan eye once more broke up into thousands. The cultist screamed as the black folds encased him in a series of violent motions. I saw the rapid unravelling of flesh and bone and looked away, not needing to give myself any more nightmares.

Then, silence. No more tremors. Cornelius slowly came out of his trance.

Carved into the wooden floor in deep black letters were four words:
WE CAN BE TOGETHER.

* * *

Like everyone else, witches get it wrong all the time. I believed someone had taken Jupiter from me when in truth, she had left. Considering this modern new world, I'm not sure I could judge her for it.

"You're too young to look so worried."

Sidha and I were smoking on my front porch, sharing his illegal hooch. In the yard, the two peach trees my mother had planted were beginning to blossom.

"I can't even blame it for the deaths of all those people. Can I?"

"Even the devil can't blame itself for existing."

"Maybe this world had somehow been better with the Old Ones ruling it."

Sidha eyed me up, reminding me of Cornelius.

“They didn’t hate. They simply didn’t care.”

Sidha seemed to consider the thought. He took a swig from his flask, dragged on the rolled cigarette, and nodded slowly.

Carnivorous

WILLIAM F. NOLAN

William F. Nolan writes mostly in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres. Though best known for coauthoring the acclaimed dystopian science fiction novel Logan's Run with George Clayton Johnson, Nolan is the author of more than 2000 pieces (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry), and has edited over twenty-five anthologies in a career that has spanned more than sixty years. He was a key member of The Group, a collective of authors in the 1950s and '60s, which included Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, John Tomerlin, and by extension Ray Bradbury (as mentor).

He has won numerous awards in his long career, including the World Fantasy Convention Award and two Bram Stoker Awards. A vegetarian, Nolan resides in Vancouver, Washington.



WILL NOT SPEND ANOTHER WINTER IN THIS CITY!" declared Martha Burns. She paced the living room of their small apartment, stared out the window at the "yard littered with wind-snapped branches. A fresh gust rattled the pane. To Martha, these constant, battering gusts seemed truly demonic, with the worst yet to come. Winter, in Chicago, had barely begun, and the cold spring months ahead were only a minor improvement. The cold was dreadful, penetrating, exhausting—a gradual erosion of the soul.

She faced her husband, desperation in her eyes. "This awful wind . . . the snow . . . the ice . . . The weather is killing me, Dave! I need to see some greenery—trees, flowers, plants. I'm tired of this gray world of concrete and steel. It was so freezing cold shopping the Loop this afternoon that the little hairs in my nose froze up. No more of these damn winters!"

Dave Burns agreed. As a boy in Missouri—young, eager, full of energy—he had looked forward to each winter . . . sledding down the hill on 34th with Tommy Griffith who lived at the end of the block . . . helping Dad build a six-foot snowman in the back yard . . . a time for tossing iced snowballs at Jimmy Farmer, his worst enemy . . . a time for Mom's hot apple cider . . . skating Troost Lake . . . and watching a zillion fast-falling white flakes cover the streets and sidewalks, turning Kansas City into a crystal wonderland.

But he was no longer that snow-loving boy. He was a balding, overweight, forty-year-old manager of a barely profitable music store in downtown Chicago—who hated winter.

"Okay," he told Martha, "I'll get Sid Collins to fill in at the store and we'll head for California. Sid lived there in the seventies. Says it never gets really cold in Los Angeles. Sunshine all year round. I'll post an online ad and see what turns up. Gotta admit this bloody cold is killing us both."

The ad was brief and to the point:

WANTED: Chicago couple seek rental of modest house in L.A. area for winter/spring months. Must be reasonably priced. Contact information provided once terms are met.

The ad was answered by a woman who said she would call soon.

A few days later, a woman who identified herself as Viola P. Fanning called. If a suitable agreement could be reached, she was prepared to offer them her home in the Santa Monica suburb of Greater Los Angeles for the desired period, all utilities paid. The house, she explained, was quite old. "But I have faithfully maintained it. And there is an upstairs view of the ocean."

"Sounds wonderful!" exclaimed Martha. "I can't *wait* to sunbathe on the beach!"

"We should complete this discussion via Skype," declared the woman. "It is important, at this point, that we establish visual contact."

"Of course," said Martha. "I understand . . . about visual contact."

Dave expressed doubt to his wife after the call had ended. "Let's not rush into this—take it one step at a time. We can't handle anything fancy. Rent in California is sky-high. We don't know *what* she'll charge."

"But our ad said 'reasonable.' I'm sure we'll be able to afford it." She shivered. "Oh, Dave, we've just *got* to get out of this miserable cold!"

Dave Burns nodded. "That's what we both want."

* * *

The Skype call came through the next day. The screen image of Viola Fanning was that of a stark-faced woman in her late sixties, attired in black, with a flow of Victorian lace at her throat. Her gray hair was pulled back into a tight bun, her eyes cold and night-haunted.

"I am an avid collector," the woman on the screen told them. "I am particularly fond of fungoid plants. In Europe, if I am fortunate, I shall unearth several rare species. I expect to remain overseas into fall, and—if I

am satisfied that you meet *my* requirements—you may have the house here in California for a period of five months.”

Dave was suddenly skeptical. “And just what *are* your requirements, Ms. Fanning?”

“You must not be accompanied by pets or children. I dislike cats and dogs—and children are messy. I will not tolerate them.”

“There’s just the two of us,” said Martha.

“My primary concern is the proper care of my darlings.” Her dark eyes bore into them. “Do either of you know anything about plants?”

“I was good in botany in college,” said Martha, “but I’m no expert.”

“Are you diligent about following instructions? My dearly departed husband wasn’t too careful about that.”

“I would say so.”

“My darlings require special care. They are, each of them, very close to my heart. They’re the only link to my family that I have left.”

“Me,” Dave declared, “I’m into flowers. Like roses. All kinds of roses.”

Her dark eyes flashed. “My darlings are much more than *roses*.” She made the word sound obscene. “They are sensitive and intelligent.”

“I’ve never thought of plants that way,” he admitted, adjusting his chair to face the screen. “Before we discuss this any further we have to know what the rent will be. We can’t afford a—”

She waved the problem aside. “You need have no concern in that regard. The house is yours, rent free, if you follow my instructions.”

Martha was nudging him, nodding vigorously. Her whisper was strident: “Tell her *yes!*”

“Your offer is most generous, Ms. Fanning. I’m sure we can take good care of your plants if that’s all you want.”

“Nothing more,” said the dark woman. “You will find some bottles in the greenhouse containing the food for my darlings. So . . . do we have a deal?” And she smiled, but her eyes remained cold.

“Yeah,” said Dave. “We have a deal.”

* * *

A large manila envelope later arrived at their Chicago apartment, a contract enclosed along with a handwritten note:

In accepting this contract, you agree, totally and completely, to comply with the terms contained herein. Any alteration shall result in the immediate termination of the agreement.

WARNING: You are not to enter the laboratory behind the greenhouse. Entry is forbidden. The work done there must remain private.

The note was signed V. P. F. Dave began scanning the pages. Two paragraphs in the contract were underlined in red:

My plants must be fed twice during each 24-hour period: at noon and again at midnight. Their feed must consist only of the bottled food from the greenhouse.

Additionally, Mrs. Burns must sing to my plants after each nightly feeding. They adore romantic songs. Their particular favorites are "In the Good Old Summertime," "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair," and "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." No other songs may be substituted. Lyrics are provided.

"Well, that cuts it!" Dave tossed aside the contract with a snarl of disgust. "The old bat is a fruitcake. Totally out of her freaking mind. She can't expect us to—"

"But we have no other options," declared Martha. "Our personal stuff is already on the way to California. And we're getting the place for *free*! We can't back out now."

Dave shook his head. "This whole setup is crazy. We haven't even seen the house yet. Could be a shack."

"In Santa Monica? C'mon, hon, get real. There are no 'shacks' in Santa Monica."

"I still say the whole thing is crazy. But . . ." His voice softened. "Guess you're right. We have no other options."

* * *

The Fanning house was far from a shack, eliciting a burst of joy from Martha.

The screen-porched two-story structure, freshly painted in dandelion yellow, was located at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac. It nested in a mass of neat green shrubbery, fenced by opposing box hedges. A flagstone path, through the well-trimmed yard, led to brightly colored wooden steps fronting an oak door.

Inside, the house was decorated in ornate Victorian style. Heavy velvet drapes, dark, artfully carved furniture. Lace curtains. Leaded windows, flashing a variety of rainbow colors. The master bedroom was, in Dave's words, "super cool," and the kitchen, to Martha's delight, was three times the size of theirs in Chicago.

Of course, the weather was perfect.

Martha cupped her hands, eyes shining. "Oh, Dave, isn't it just—just *grand?*"

Dave was grinning. "Pretty neat, I'd say. Even has a good-sized library. And there's a gazebo out back next to the greenhouse. Yep, the old gal sure has kept the place up, I'll give her that."

"We're so lucky to be here."

"Yeah." Dave nodded. "Lucky."

* * *

"It's getting toward noon," Martha reported to Dave. He was in porch shade, seated in the chain swing, reading a book. "Feeding time for the plants."

He looked annoyed. "Let 'em wait. I want to check out the rest of Fanning's library. Some great books there. Classics!" He held up the thick volume he'd been reading. "*Moby-Dick*. First edition!"

She frowned. "I'm ashamed of you! We promised to take proper care of her plants. If you won't go with me, I'll go alone."

"Suit yourself," he said, returning to his book.

After she'd left the porch, Dave relented. "Aw, hell!" he muttered—and caught up with her at the greenhouse door. "You laid a guilt trip on me," he mock-complained.

She smiled at his words. "C'mon, let's meet the gang."

Sliding open the glass door, they entered the greenhouse. The odor was not pleasant.

"I thought plants were supposed to smell sweet," said Dave.

"Different plants give off different odors," she said, scanning the area. "The one that's *really* foul isn't here. Native to Indonesia. Called the 'corpse plant' because it smells like a rotting body. Eats the dead flesh of its prey—dung beetles and other insects."

"Jeez!" Dave grunted. "That one sounds really gross."

"It's also quite large. Can grow up to ten feet. It's purple, with a long yellow tubular stalk thrusting up from the center, like—"

"Like it's giving you the finger."

She laughed. "Exactly! They say its stench attracts prey."

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"Botany, remember? I've told you before that I majored in science at college. Botany was big for me."

"You haven't talked much about your college days."

"Why talk about the past? It's over and done with." Impish chuckle. "I've noticed you don't talk much about your life with all those bosomy Missouri chicks."

"Touché."

They both smiled.

* * *

The greenhouse was wide and deep, with columned shafts of sunlight spearing down from the beamed glass roof. Boxed plants were on tables everywhere, and the whole place was lined with a fuzzy moss exuding a faint orangish glow.

"What about roses?" asked Dave. "Where are they? Thought I'd see a lot of roses."

"Obviously Ms. Fanning prefers exotic plants." Spotting a shelf to their left, she nodded. "Ah . . . the food for her darlings." She removed an odd-shaped bottle of luminescent, orange-pink liquid from several others on the shelf. "Ought to be enough here to last a while."

“The old gal is certainly freaked out on plants,” he declared.

The tables created a series of aisles with various plants on top of them. Most were unlabeled and looked as though they were dying from lack of care. Except, of course, the tables in the area closest to the back. The moss was especially thick on these tables, beginning to climb the walls in verdant cascades.

“All these here are carnivorous—not indigenous to California. This moss is unusual: it appears to be exhibiting a form of bioluminescence. How curious!”

“Bio-whatsit?”

“Bioluminescence—a phenomenon where certain plants and animals can produce their own light. They can glow, in other words.”

Dave shook his head in bewilderment as they moved along the aisle.

“Okay, Professor, give me a rundown on ‘carnivorous.’ Educate me.”

“Well, there are over seven hundred types of carnivorous plants,” she explained. “They’re predators, trapping small creatures like flies and digesting them. Some use mechanical means to kill prey, à la the Venus Flytrap, or pitcher plants. Still others, such as the Sundew, exude a sticky kind of mucus, similar to tree sap, and the insects can’t get away.”

“That’s sickening,” said Dave. He leaned forward to examine a boxed specimen at closer range. “Ugly critter!”

“Not everyone would agree. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

“Not *this* beholder,” he said firmly. “They’re all ugly as hell.” He pointed at another nearby plant, a Flytrap. “Just like that sucker.”

“Oh, lighten up, dear!” said Martha. “Hollywood even makes movies based on these types of plants. Remember *The Little Shop of Horrors* or *Day of the Triffids*?”

The plant’s blood-red center featured a large open mouth ringed, top to bottom, with sharp, flexible teeth. It quivered slightly under a mild breeze from an overhead roof vent, creating the appearance of conscious life.

“Damn thing’s moving,” declared Dave. “It’s alive!”

“It *is* alive in one sense,” said Martha, “but not in the sense that animals are.”

Dave took a nervous step back from the plants. “Are they . . . *dangerous*?”

“Only to the prey they trap and devour.”

“Well, that’s comforting to know. But still . . .” His voice trailed off.

“There are others here that also qualify as major predators,” Martha stated. “If you’re a fly or cricket, that is.” She moved along the line of boxes. “This one”—nodding toward a spiny red-and-yellow specimen with sinuous, tentacle-like shoots— “he’s a nasty little baby.”

A slow surge of glistening sap oozed from its center stem, which was covered with a hard-shelled, bark-like substance.

“Very nasty,” said Dave.

“Next we have the ‘Tiger Lily.’ Called that for the shape of its head.”

Bulbous, swollen, fanged, its snake-like head was speckled in bilious green. It drew a grunt of revulsion from Dave.

The adjoining box contained a plant whose fungoid leaves formed a hooded funnel.

“It’s very effective,” said Martha. “Insects are weakened by its narcotic nectar. They fall into the funnel and are consumed.”

“How charming,” said Dave.

She kept moving along the line. “Then we have this little rascal. Imported from China, and quite an efficient predator.”

It brandished sword-sharp leaves with lithe tendrils protruding from its central stem, and was notably larger than the other plants. Dave found it grotesque.

“I must admit this one’s a little creepy,” said Martha. “It can paralyze and swallow animals as large as a baby rat.”

“Ugh!” Dave shook his head. “You sure seem to be up on all this . . . *plant* stuff.”

“Botany, babe, botany! It was one of my best subjects.”

“Uh-huh,” said Dave. “Well, it sure ain’t mine!”

Martha glanced down at the silver watch on her left wrist. “Oops! Feeding time for the gang.” She took one of the odd-shaped bottles from her purse, handing it to Dave. “You do the honors.” Impish grin. “You need to bond with our leafy friends.”

Dave held the bottle of orange-pink fluid up to the light. “Christ! There are all kinds of bugs floating in this thing!”

“Perfectly normal,” said Martha. “It’s what they eat.”

“I’ll tell you what it perfectly is—it’s perfectly disgusting.” He handed the bottle back to her. “*You* feed ’em. I’m outta here.”

Stepping swiftly away, he exited the greenhouse.

* * *

Just after midnight. Dave was deep into a first edition of *Oliver Twist* when Martha entered the library. She kissed him on his cheek.

"Time for my *début*," she said. "My leafy audience awaits."

Dave scowled at her. "You don't actually mean to *sing* to a bunch of plants?"

"It's in our contract," she reminded him. "Three songs after the midnight feeding. We agreed to it."

"I can't believe you're doing this!"

"*Believe* it." She smiled. "I have a rather good voice. Sang in the school choir. It'll be fun."

"You have a weird idea of fun."

"Care to join me for my audition?"

"No thanks, I'll pass. I'll stick with Dickens."

"Your choice," she said, kissed him on the cheek again, and left.

As the night deepened, Dave heard his wife's lilting contralto drifting to him from the dimly lit greenhouse. The song was "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."

He put his book down and moved to the window where he could see the greenhouse, enjoying his wife's singing.

"She's not half-bad—gotta give it to her."

With each rise and warble of her voice, he noticed that the orange-pink glow under the doorframe of the greenhouse intensified; when she stopped to take a breath, the glow lessened considerably. He observed that the seam around the door to the lab did the same, as though there were more moss inside it.

"Well, I'll be. That's plain *weird*. Gives me the damn creeps!"

* * *

Four months later, the phone rang.

Martha answered. "Oh, Ms. Fanning . . . what a nice surprise to hear from you . . . Yes, yes, all the plants are fine . . . I assure you we've been taking excellent care of them . . . They certainly are *hungry* little fellows . . ." A pause. "Of *course* we'll be ready to leave . . . all right then . . ."

Martha put down the phone. "That was—"

"I heard," nodded Dave. "She still in Europe?"

"So far as I know. Says she'll be out of touch until her return. She's in the woods somewhere hunting fungus."

"What a nutty old dame."

Martha sighed. "Been so lovely being here, the wonderful weather and all. I'll miss it." Another sigh. "I *hate* going home!"

"Sid called from the store. Things are looking up. Seems we made a smart move investing in vinyl. It's making a big comeback. Hot with the younger set."

"That's nice," said Martha. Her tone was strained.

"What's wrong?" Dave asked. "You look worried."

"That's because I *am*," she confessed. "The plant food's getting low. We're almost out of bottles and I can't reach Ms. Fanning."

"Gonna be all right," he told her. "We've probably got enough until she gets back."

"I hope so," said Martha. "I really hope so."

* * *

The following weekend found Martha coughing violently, breaking loose chunks of orange, glowing phlegm; the accompanying stabbing headaches sent her reeling to bed.

Dave called a local doctor, a sallow-faced man named Sutter, radiating authority, who agreed to examine Martha at the house.

"Your wife is suffering from a severe bronchial infection of some sort," Sutter declared. "Running a high fever. She needs to be hospitalized."

"It's that serious?"

"Yes, Mister Burns, it's *that* serious."

After Sutter left, Dave stood at the living-room window, staring numbly into the darkness. The soft glow of the moss coming from the

greenhouse and lab put him on edge. His fists were clenched, his heart racing. *What the hell's wrong with her? Is that damn plant food radioactive or something? My God, what if something happens to Martha?* It would be the end of his world.

The ambulance arrived for Martha Burns that same night. Dave gently stroked her fevered cheek as she was placed inside. "You'll be just fine," he told her. "I'm right here with you, and everything's gonna be fine."

Later, Doctor Sutter told Dave that, thanks to antibiotics and an antifungal to treat her infection, his wife was much improved but needed to remain in the hospital for another seven to ten days.

Dave was greatly relieved and made frequent visits. Each time she asked him about the plants. Are they okay? Is he feeding them on schedule? "Yeah, and it's a bummer. Stinks in there. Hate feeding those damn things. And I sure don't sing to them!"

"What about their bottled food? Is it holding up?"

"Not really. Been stretching it by feeding 'em smaller amounts, but we're running out fast."

She frowned, eyes clouded with concern. "There must be more food! Try the lab. She might be keeping some extra bottles there."

"But she warned us not to—"

"I know, hon, but this is an emergency."

"Okay then, I'll pick the lock and have a look inside."

"Can you do that?"

"No sweat. Used to practice magic when I was a kid. Locks are a cinch."

Martha relaxed back into her pillow.

"Can I get you anything? Do you need anything?"

"Thanks, hon, but right now all I need is sleep."

Her eyes closed.

It was the last time they were together.

* * *

At the lab, Dave had no trouble picking the ancient lock.

It was late afternoon, and the sun had dropped below the horizon. Dave's long shadow preceded him as he scanned the area. The interior was

jammed with filing cabinets, glass beakers, and the usual laboratory equipment. It was overrun with thick moss—but no bottled plant food.

A circular metal ring in the middle of the lab floor caught Dave's attention. When he pulled back a trapdoor laced with cobwebs a gust of extremely cold air billowed up from the darkness below. Was this a storage area? Maybe the bottles were kept there.

Damp concrete steps led downward to a brick-walled, night-black cellar. Dave descended into the chilled darkness, using a small pocket flash he'd taken from the house to illumine the moss-covered walls. It cast a thin beam of light ahead of him. No food bottles; all the shelves were empty.

Then he saw it—an orange glowing mass of choking moss huddled in a far corner. Dave centered the flash beam on the shape. To his horror, it appeared to be a man covered in rotted vines and thick, viscid leaves. Not entirely a man, but something that had once *been* a man—something that was no longer human.

Dave drew in a tight breath. So this was Viola Fanning's infernal manifestation—the deformed end product of a twisted mind. *Was this her dead husband? Some insane science project gone awry, now locked away in the lab?* Dave found a wall switch by the stairs and snapped on the overheads. The dark figure stirred into life, awakened from its hibernation by the sudden burst of light. A long, furry tongue unfurled like a fiddlehead from a hole in what seemed to be a ruined face. Leafy creepers looped its body, and barbed, razored thorns thrust out from the torso, which appeared to be comprised of woody vines and bone that had fused together under a tight skin of smooth bark. A mass of throbbing feelers knit together to form the misshapen head; a reeking growth of gray fungus obscured half of its bulk.

The thing's gelatinous eyes, seeping sticky resin, fastened on Dave Burns; its voice was hollow and rasping: "Need . . . feed friends . . . hungry . . . you *not* feed enough!"

This creature sensed the plants' unabated hunger—perhaps linked to them by some unifying psychic force—plant to plant-thing.

The angry creature advanced, gnarled hands outstretched.

Dave knew he had to act. Scooping up a three-legged metal stool, he smashed it across the creature's head. Pus-colored fluid spurted from the wound, as the thing surged forward to encircle Dave's body in its spiny arms. As moss encircled his legs, trapping him, Dave's ribs cracked audibly

—and he cried out in sharp agony as his backbone snapped. Pain, like blazed lightning, engulfed him. Then it was over.

Dave Burns would never feel pain again.

* * *

A hedge trimmer had been placed, along with other garden tools, on a high shelf in the lab. Viola Fanning had used it to trim the box hedge. Now the creature grasped the metal saw awkwardly and switched it on, hovering over the broken body now glowing and oozing at its feet; Dave was already being ingested by the moss enveloping the lab, causing the weak orange glow to intensify as the plants fed on his body. It did not take long to reduce Dave Burns to small pieces with the trimmer. *Very small pieces.* His remains filled a canvas sack that the creature dragged into the greenhouse.

Time to feed itself—and its hungry friends.

* * *

Martha had phoned Dave to pick her up at the hospital, but had been unable to reach him. After Dr. Sutter had signed her medical discharge, she took a taxi back to the Fanning house.

Martha keyed open the front door, calling out to Dave: “Hon, I’m home!”

No reply. Silence.

Maybe he was out in the yard, she told herself. *Hadn’t heard the phone ringing. Ought to be back inside by now. Maybe he’s in the library, deep into some first edition.* She checked there. Empty. No Dave. The gazebo, then? *Maybe taking a morning nap in the shade. No, not there either.* Puzzled, she tried the greenhouse. Why would he be here considering his marked distaste for plants?

Martha never found her husband.

What she did find stunned and revolted her: pieces of a human-like creature straight out of her worst nightmares. Gummy plant nectar covered what remained of the slimed body parts, glistening wetly from a canvas sack in the shafted sunlight. The plants had also overgrown their containers,

spilling out onto the sides of the table, commingling with the abundant overgrowth of glowing moss, which was now spreading away from the greenhouse so much that she could actually see the tendrils and vines slithering away from the building, through the yard, and up the trees at the neighbor's place in a thick, ropy display.

Martha screamed.

* * *

"Thought I'd heard everything, but I just can't figure this," declared Sheriff Nelson Brock, taking her statement at the police station. He was a tall man, big in girth, eyes hidden behind mirrored glasses. "Don't make no sense. Never heard nothing like it. Oh, I can figure your mister plain taking off somewhere on his own, for God knows what reason, but *this* . . ."

Martha Burns, still badly shaken, her eyes swollen from lack of sleep, stared at the big man.

"The *plants*," she whispered. "They're taking over—please do something before it's too late!"

Outside, a hard rain began.

On a Dreamland's Moon

ASHLEY DIOSES

Ashley Dioses is a writer of horror and fantasy poetry from Southern California. Her work has appeared in Weird Fiction Review, Spectral Realms, Weirdbook, Skelos, and elsewhere. Her debut collection of dark traditional poetry, Diary of a Sorceress, appeared in 2017 from Hippocampus Press. Her poem "Carathis" appeared in Ellen Datlow's recommended list in Best Horror of the Year, Volume Seven. She has also appeared in the HWA's Poetry Showcase 2016 for her poem "Ghoul Mistress."

The cats of Ulthar steal across my dreams
On paws of softest fur and blur the seams
Of my subconscious with their purrs and eyes
Of molten gold that twinkle and that gleam
Like beacon lights toward where their kingdom lies.
I dream a dreamer's dream of longing for
Entrance to Dreamland and the moon's closed doors.
Nyarlathotep, the God of Chaos, soon
Awaits in dream; for him my heart outpours!
Why must He lurk afar, behind curs'd rune?
The ghouls repeat his words, "I am the last,
I am the Crawling Chaos. From long past
Centuries, I hear words not of this plane.
Renewing myths from times far gone, I cast
Chaos across the lands—Chaos will reign."
The pixie parasols of royal blues
Bedecked the path to doors of vibrant hues.
I had to follow it and try to see
My emperor of dreams, for all rare views
Of him would scarcely answer my dark plea!
The hallways luminous began to dim,
And as I entered the next room, the grim
Expressions of distracted Lengish men
Upon me looked, as moonbeasts with wet limbs
And grayish skin gazed eyeless through the den.
The coiling lurkers in the serpent pools
Appeared to hint with their black socket-jewels
Of some excitement imminent, and held
The men of Leng back, for they would be fools
To spoil my hunt to find where my king dwelled.
A snicker echoed through my head, and I

Knew that my god was watching with keen eye.
O how I shivered for His very touch!
I offered up my mind—for me to die
Would lend a soul unworthy of His clutch.
Hot are the sands of time, yet on I tread,
For every step I take ignites my red
And pumping heart aflame with a desire
For Him, my god, to pull my heartstrings' thread.
My trembling thighs grow moist from no sand's fire.

Hail Nitokris, my patron, grant me skill
In amorous endeavors so the thrill
Of His enchantment will coil round my soul!
O queen of ghouls, O goddess of the kill,
Adorn me with the power of your whole
Being; instill in me the strength beyond
My mortal kin! My madness makes a bond
With you and, surely, Him . . . O please be so!
In swirls of yellow does my queen respond
And give to me her maddened blessing, though
Will it enough be for my lord, my king?
Nyarlathotep, he speaks—yet will He sing?—
Into my ears soft words that vanish like
The sand through fingers; like the chill in spring.
He is aware of me yet will not strike.

My god has come to me in dreams with sweet
And feverous desires released in heat.
His hands upon me set my skin aflame,
And lingering, His taste is still a treat
Upon my lips; His tongue begins to claim
The contours of my torso, hips, and thighs.
He calls to me; I come beneath the skies
Of poison reds, and fiery greens, and stars
That ever bleed upon these Dreamland sties.
Chaotic wasteland welcomes me, and scars

My mind like verse engraved on graveyard stone.
Up marble stairs and over ashen bone,
I start to hasten through the labyrinth's green
And yellow passages of star-dust, blown
Through the high windows, open wide, which glean
The stuff of star-winds in this land of dreams.
The walls with faceless souls pulse at the seams
Where they would claw their way through the gray walls.
They cry in direst warning, yet their screams
Are echoless, and I ignore their squalls.
The night-gaunts stalk me stealthily, unseen
In crevices above; with senses keen
They know my presence, swift reflections from
Their rubber wings betraying their black sheen.
They hunger for me, yet they will not come.
I enter the last chamber high inside
The palace where He waits for me beside
A window looking over Dreamland's moon.
He slightly turns his head toward his bride
And fully faces me—O, how I swoon!

I stood before the pharaoh darkly masked,
And I was lost in pride as the quest tasked
Me finally our meeting did allow!
“O love, will you unmask for me?” I asked.
His laughter echoed as He clutched his brow. . . .
A sinister abyss awaited my
Awestruck and hungry gaze, yet I did cry
Aloud, for Beauty itself I beheld
Within my crimson-teared and flaming eyes!
My soul, now His, by His dire hand was felled.
The Crawling Chaos stripped the flesh away
From my frail mortal husk, and the decay
Began to set in; and yet I was shown
Behind the mask as He beheld his prey.
The laughter grew, only it was my own.

Teshfigo Creek

AARON BITTNER

Aaron Bittner is a writer by trade, most of his output being industrial nonfiction. The first book he ever bought for himself was a short story collection, The Golden Apples of the Sun by Ray Bradbury. He lives in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where he is indentured servant to his wife, two of his four children, one dog, and too many cats.

“T LOOKED BETTER IN THE PHOTOS,” KELLY SAID, eyeing the faded, peeling sign that read *Teshtigo Creek State Park*. The bald cypress trees that lined the road seemed to agree.

Jim checked his watch. “It’s already after five. Too late to go anywhere else today,” he said. “Let’s get a site.”

“Looks like we’ll get our pick,” said Kelly. “The parking lot’s empty.”

“On the first weekend in June?”

The gravel lot lay empty under the deep shade of the cypresses. As Kelly glanced at Jim he thought, *She’s blaming me. Another lousy Jim decision.*

“So we’ll have the place to ourselves,” he said. Kelly didn’t reply.

It had seemed like such a good idea at first, Jim thought. Take a long weekend and be alone, out in the woods that Kelly had always loved so much. It would give them a chance to reconnect—maybe a chance to patch things up.

Not looking good, he thought as he stepped out of the Tahoe and closed the door. The park office appeared to be deserted. Fluffy gray handfuls of mosquitoes hummed around the doorway and settled on Jim and Kelly like old friends.

“Hello?” Jim called through the open window, and the echo rattled through the empty office and faded away. The mosquitoes hummed in the drowsy afternoon. Jim slapped at them and peered about, confused.

“Jim,” Kelly said, and he turned to see a man in a rumpled greenish uniform walking slowly toward them. He was coming from the direction of the ranger’s cabin.

“Didn’t hear you pull up,” said the ranger, as though it were an accusation. He was compactly built, lean, dark, perhaps forty. His face gave away nothing.

“We’d like to get a site for the weekend,” said Jim, too loudly.

“Most people don’t come during bug season,” the ranger said, and didn’t go to the office. Jim looked for a name tag. The ranger wasn’t wearing one.

“Well, we need a site.”

“All the sites are canoe access only,” said the ranger.

“Bug season?” inquired Kelly, her eyebrows arched.

“You rent canoes, right?” said Jim.

“Pretty much the summer,” said the ranger.

“How much do the canoes run?” said Jim.

“What kind of bugs?” put in Kelly.

The ranger turned abruptly and went into the office. The clouds of mosquitoes parted as he passed through. Jim and Kelly followed, a moveable feast. Jim glanced at his wife’s butt as they went. Yep, he thought, still hot.

The office was also hot, and dingy. The walls were lined with ancient paneling that didn’t look good the day it was put up. A rack by the door held dusty pamphlets on local attractions, and posters showed pictures of the wildlife one might find in and around Teshtigo Creek. There was a map on one wall tracing the creek from its origin in a swamp to where it poured into Bennett’s Creek. Adjacent to the map was a big poster touting the “History of the Teshtigo Creek Region.”

From behind a sagging customer counter, the ranger handed them brochures on mosquitoes, chiggers, blackflies, leeches, and two kinds of ticks.

“You have all these?” Kelly asked.

“And then some,” said the ranger, and didn’t smile. A mosquito hovered near the ranger’s ear. Jim felt an unreasoning urge to clap his hands and squash the insect. Quelling the urge made him sound more irritated than he really was when he said, “We need a campsite and a canoe. Please.”

Kelly was still eyeing the brochures. “Jim, I’m not sure . . .”

“The bugs will eat you up,” said a dry old voice from the back of the room. A stooped, white-haired, ancient version of the park ranger had just come through a doorway in the back of the office. He too was wearing a ranger’s uniform, but this one was faded and threadbare. A tag on the

breast pocket read *Robbins*. He had the same dark eyes as the younger man, but his seamed face showed concern.

“Really,” said the old man. “You don’t want to do this. Not now.”

“He made his choice,” snapped the younger ranger. He opened his mouth, about to say something else, but abruptly closed it.

Kelly was looking at the poster. “Pardon me . . . Is this an old park?”

“The oldest in the county, and one of the oldest in the state,” said the old man.

“And there were Indian settlements here? The poster says that the place used to belong to the Cho—Chowa . . .” Kelly stammered.

“*Chowanoc*.” The younger ranger’s eyes bored into Jim’s.

“What happened to them?” asked Kelly.

“Smallpox, mostly,” said the old man.

“The usual story,” said the younger one, and clamped his jaw.

Jim shook his head. “We’re out of time,” he said. “It’s camp here or sleep in the car.” Attaboy, Jim, he thought. Way to be decisive.

Kelly rolled her eyes and sighed. “If I get Lyme disease you will *never* hear the end of this.”

* * *

By the time Jim pounded in the last tent peg, it was good and dark. Kelly had gathered a pile of dead branches and had a fire going. Jim sat up, sighed, then looked around for his backpack.

“I figured it out,” Kelly said.

“Figured out what?” replied Jim.

“What was strange about the guy at the park office.”

“You mean, aside from getting an F in customer service?” Jim found the pack and began rummaging.

“The mosquitoes weren’t biting him.”

“Those guys probably have some really good repellent.”

“Hmmm.”

He pulled out a bulky sweatshirt and threw it aside.

“What are you looking for?” Kelly asked as he rooted in the nylon depths.

"This," he said, pulling out a pretty good bottle of Cabernet.

She frowned at him. "Jim, the sign said no alcoholic beverages."

"Kelly," he began, then stopped himself. Be nice, he thought, and tried again. "Sweetheart, I understand what the sign said, but it's more important to me that we do what we came here to do. Remember? We're here to try to rebuild our relationship."

"Our relationship is not built on booze!" she snorted.

"No," he admitted. "It's built on us cooperating with each other." He groped in the pack for the bottle opener. "Now I've done my part. I'm trying, as you asked me to do. Can you work with me a little?"

He could tell he'd won that point when she changed the subject. "I wonder if drinking wine will help keep the mosquitoes away," she said, "or if they'll just like the stuff."

"Only one way to tell," he said, and handed her a plastic cup.

* * *

With most of the bottle gone and the fire burning low, Jim surveyed the scene with a happy expression. Things are looking up, he thought, as he considered his wife nestled into his right shoulder, her hair draped over his arm. How long since I smelled the shampoo in her hair? he wondered. Too long.

"You know, I'd forgotten," Kelly said.

"Forgotten what?"

"That I really do like you." She sipped from the cup. A dozen smartass answers rolled through Jim's mind and he suppressed them all.

Instead he said, "And love me?" He felt so painfully vulnerable, but he had to ask it.

For an answer, she turned her face up to him and kissed him. Now this is communication, Jim thought. This kiss is a promise.

At just that moment a mosquito started drilling a private well on the end of his nose. He stood it as long as he could, but after ninety seconds he began to squirm.

"What?" said Kelly, backing off a bit.

“Friggin’ mosquito,” said Jim, and as he moved to squish it he suddenly he got an idea.

“How cold do you think that water is?” Jim asked.

“Why? . . . You’re nuts!” blurted Kelly, but she was smiling at him.

“Too cold for a midnight dip, do you think?”

“Not for a crazy man, maybe. I’ll stay up here.” She burrowed deeper under his arm and took another drink of Cabernet.

“Do you remember the last time we went skinnydipping?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It was summer at the time.”

“It’s almost summer again. Come on!”

“That water is nasty.”

“No, it isn’t.”

He was being honest; the water was clean, gin-clear to ten feet down in the deep spots.

She made a face at him. “You just want to see if I’ll do it.”

He put on his best innocent look. “Well, yeah,” he said, as if it were obvious. “Hey, at least the mosquitoes won’t be able to get at the parts that are underwater.”

The night air was about 75 degrees, not super warm but not cold either. When Jim stood up and started stripping off his shirt, Kelly stood up with him.

“This is crazy,” she said, but in the glow of the campfire anything seemed possible. They left their clothes in the dirt.

* * *

Even though they had set up camp practically on the creek bank, in the dark the water seemed further away than Jim remembered, even by flashlight. He took Kelly’s hand and they walked ooh-ah-ooh-ooh over sticks and gravel to the cool mud of the beaver pond. Jim stepped in first and sucked in his breath.

“Cold, huh?”

“Gimme a minute,” he murmured. After a few seconds he found he could manage, and took another step.

Kelly giggled and shone the flashlight on him. "Don't look now, Mister Hero, but you've got mosquitoes all over your butt."

"Not for long," Jim said, and strode into the water. As it climbed up past his knees he felt his guts bracing for impact. He turned to look at Kelly.

"You comin' in?" he called.

"Not sure," she called back. "What's it like?"

"I—"

As he was taking a step something like a dozen little pins bored into the bottom of his right foot. Jim immediately picked up the foot again and, overbalanced, fell face-first into Teshtigo Creek.

Jim's first thought was COLD and his second was MY HEAD IS FULL OF WATER and his third was which way was the air again? It may have been the wine, or it may have been the darkness, or it just might have been the quart or so of water that had jetted into his nose and mouth when his face hit, but he had momentarily lost track of which way was up, and the water seemed much deeper than it had any right to be.

Suddenly there was a light glimmering at him, and a hand reached for his. He took it and nearly pulled Kelly under with him, but she kept her footing and his head broke the surface again.

"Jim! Jim! What happened? Are you okay?" she was shouting at him, but he was too busy coughing and gasping for air to make any reply. He held her hand and nodded his head to say gimme a minute, and she did.

"I—I'm okay," he finally croaked out.

"You sure as hell didn't look okay!" Kelly snapped at him. "This water is freezing. What were you *thinking*? What happened to you anyway?"

"I stepped on something sharp and lost my balance."

"Oh, great. Are you hurt?"

Jim had forgotten about his foot, and now that it was brought back to his memory, he realized he couldn't feel it. "I don't know," he said. "Let's get back to the campfire and check it out." Suddenly skinnydipping had lost all its appeal.

Back at the camp with his clothes on, Jim shone the flashlight on the bottom of his right foot. Under the arch was a semicircle of twelve or fifteen tiny puncture wounds, fairly superficial but all full of mud. Jim wiped

them clean as best he could with alcohol pads, then applied antibiotic ointment and a clean pair of socks.

Kelly wasn't speaking to him, and the way she crawled into her sleeping bag and turned her back to him made it clear that all promises earlier expressed or implied were now rendered null and void. Once more and all together now, Jim thought, *Another lousy Jim decision*. To top it all off, by the time they'd broken camp the next day he had a cold.

On the way out they saw the park office was deserted.

* * *

The next day was Monday. That morning at the office, Jim stumbled through a miserable haze of pain and fatigue. Two cups of bad office coffee and a double dose of Ibuprofen couldn't touch the throbbing in his head, and his nose was jammed solid.

Closed for business, he thought. My whole head is closed for business. His latest assignment was open on his computer desktop, but as usual, behind it were two browser windows, one with the financials, the other with the sports news. He usually tried hard not to lose more than five minutes per hour surfing the web, but this morning his locked-up head made it impossible to concentrate. As he stared glassy-eyed at the ball scores, all he wanted to do was sleep.

It got to be so bad that at lunchtime his boss found him slumped in his chair when he'd normally be out for a sandwich. "Jesus, Jim," he said, concern in his voice. "You look like hell. I think you'd better go home." Brian was a no-nonsense kind of guy, middle-aged, with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut and an advanced case of crow's feet. Normally he was all business, but this morning he looked a little worried.

"I can manage," Jim croaked. He sat up, bleary-eyed, and did his best to look alert.

"Look, it's not that I don't think you can manage. It's that after seeing you, I really don't want what you've got. Go home and don't come back until you're over this, all right?"

Jim felt so bad he didn't argue. He locked down his computer and headed for the door.

* * *

He was so miserable when he got home that at first he didn't notice that anything was different. He had made it all the way to the bedroom of their apartment and was half undressed before it registered: Kelly's dresser was bare. No jewelry, no brushes, no makeup, no perfume. Jim stared at the dresser for a moment and blinked. The dresser stared back, as empty of Kelly's presence as the day they'd bought it.

He looked in the chest of drawers, the closet. All her things were gone. Her shampoo and razors were missing from the bathroom too. There was no note.

Not surprising, he thought. What more was there to say?

He sat on the edge of the bed and held his face in his hands. For just a minute he let himself feel how miserable he was, then he made a decision. He would call. She wouldn't pick up, of course, but he had to call because he wasn't going to be the kind of guy who didn't call when his wife walked out on him.

Her cell phone rang through to voice mail just as he'd thought. "Kelly," he said, "you don't have to tell me why. I know why. I just need to know—is this for a few days or is it forever? Because if it's a few days or even a week or two I can get through. If it's forever, well . . ." He broke off for a minute. "I'll want to talk. Look, I'm home sick today and probably tomorrow. I've got the mother of all sinus infections. Call me at home if you—"

Need me, he had been about to say. But that was the problem, wasn't it? She didn't need him or even want him. He'd taken her for granted, and now she wasn't granted any more.

"Just call me," he said, and hung up. He took four aspirin and a double dose of NyQuil and crawled into his bed with his socks still on.

* * *

The pain woke him. Was it really something stabbing between his eyes? His head was still buzzing from the antihistamine, and by all that was holy he should have been asleep. For a long moment he didn't even know where he

was—just that someone seemed to be driving an icepick into his face. The alarm clock read 2:36 A.M.

“Good grief,” he said, and flailed out for the bedside lamp. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed and, as he did so, the room reeled in lazy loops around him. He gasped and clutched at the bedclothes, trying to keep from falling onto the floor. The pain behind his face flared and he heard and felt a soft *slurrrch* as something in his pressurized sinuses shifted, pushed from chamber to chamber inside his aching skull.

He could still feel the effects of the NyQuil, but his nose and sinuses weren’t even close to clear. His head felt as though it had been packed full of hot mud. His throat was raw, and by the way the room was continuing to spin, it looked as if his ears had also joined the party. He took a breath and then another, stood up, and staggered to the bathroom.

The sight in the mirror was appalling. The first thing he noticed was the blood that had spilled out of his nose and crusted his right cheek in a thick, red-brown clot.

No wonder I couldn’t breathe, he thought. My nose is clotted shut.

The second thing he saw was that there was swelling around both of his bloodshot eyes. As he looked the face in the mirror doubled, blurred, then swam into focus again. He was going to have to clear that nose if it was ever going to heal—but then again, did he really want to start it bleeding again?

There was a squelching sound in his head and the feeling of something—something?—*squirming* in the bones behind his nose. He wadded up some toilet paper and attempted to blow it clear.

“GAAAAHHHH!” he shouted as the pain hammered between his eyes. Not only did nothing in his head budge a millimeter, but he discovered that the pain knob on this particular sinus infection went to eleven.

Forget this, he thought. I need help.

But who could he call at a quarter to three in the morning?

Normally Kelly would have been there to help, but he wasn’t going to call her now. The doctor’s office phone message informed him that office hours were from eight to five, but for after-hours service he should call the Urgent Care facility, and for emergency service dial 911.

He imagined himself dialing 911 for a sinus infection, then sitting in an ER waiting room for six hours. Urgent Care, then. He blinked stupidly at his phone. What was the number?

And then everything went gray and spun away into darkness.

* * *

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

Hot. He was hot, his lips dry, his throat scalding. He pried open one crusted eye just enough to see his living-room furniture looming over him at crazy angles. His head lay on the hardwood floor.

Hot. He was sure the skin of his face was going to start blistering at any moment. He was lying on his side in a fetal position, and the bridge of his nose felt as though it were the size of a softball.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The blows rang through his mind. He couldn't even think, they were so strong. As he swam up closer to consciousness he realized that the thudding was his heart, pounding blood with urgent force through his swollen, feverous head.

"Mishquèsand auntau."

The voice was coming from over his head somewhere. He turned his head, blinking feebly.

"Abbomocho auntau."

"Wha—what?" he mumbled.

"The wind is from the northeast," said the voice, "but the storm is not yet come."

There was an old man's face over his. The old man was so out of context, Jim couldn't place him for a moment; then suddenly the memory fell into place. It was the old man from the state park, in worn jeans and a flannel shirt. How had he got into the apartment?

"Robbins," Jim managed to whisper.

"*Tekeli-li, Tuppaûntash, Yeush nokkóneyeuukish!*" the old man intoned at him. Jim had no reply.

"Come out, little one. Come out, *nuttaunes. Pauwau auntau. Maunêtu auntau.* Come out," the old man chanted.

"What are you talking about?" Jim finally croaked. He was still lying on the floor, staring up at the old man looming over him. He could tell by the light coming in the windows that it was almost dawn.

"*Kutulu . . . wunnechauog.* They are his children." Suddenly the old man waved a hand at Jim's head and barked "*Maunêtu auntau! COME!*"

A blinding slash of pain knifed through Jim's face. He thrashed and screamed, and as he screamed he felt a muscular writhing in his sinuses. An impossible pressure was moving, shifting, driving from chamber to chamber in his swollen, fevered skull. The clot that had scabbed over his right nostril burst outward, and his head snapped back. With a horrible burning sensation Jim felt something squirm out of his face and onto the floor. It landed with a soft plopping sound, as though someone had dropped a chunk of stew beef on the floor. He turned his tear-filled eyes to the thing that had fallen.

My God, he thought. *That did not come out of me.* But he could feel a piece of his mind break loose and run mad, yammering.

The thing on the floor looked at first glance like a slug. It was gray, a full four inches long, and it was wet with pus, blood, and slime.

The head is wrong, Jim thought. *Wrongwrongwrongwrongwrong,* the demented part of him chanted.

The head was eyeless, round, and dominated by a broad mouth. The thing snapped its jaw two or three times, showing interlocking pointed teeth like a piranha. It had no lips, only teeth, and two vestigial little arms like a salamander's legs, but with hooked claws on the three tiny digits.

"You're lucky," the old man said, kneeling down. He took the creature in his hands and cradled it lovingly. "She hasn't laid her eggs yet."

Oh my God my God my God my God, Jim thought, and he could feel the rest of his mind being tempted to join in the yammering.

"It's a good thing I found you," the old man said.

Jim struggled up onto his elbows and then sat up. His nose was bleeding freely; he pinched it shut and held his hand there.

“But—why did you come looking for me?” he said. “And how did you get into the apartment?”

“I had to,” the old man said simply. “I had to get the *nuttaunes* back.” He slipped the slug-thing into a pocket of his windbreaker, as if it were some sort of pet.

“But why?” asked Jim, feeling stupid.

The old man looked at him with grave eyes and did not smile.

“Because it isn’t time yet,” he said, and walked out.

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CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

Caitlín R. Kiernan has been hailed by the New York Times as “one of our essential authors of dark fiction.” A two-time winner of both the World Fantasy and Bram Stoker awards, she has published ten novels, including The Red Tree and The Drowning Girl: A Memoir. She is also the recipient of the Locus and James Tiptree, Jr. awards. Her short fiction has been collected in thirteen volumes, including Tales of Pain and Wonder, The Ammonite Violin & Others, A Is for Alien, and The Ape’s Wife and Other Stories. Subterranean Press released a two-volume set collecting the best of her short fiction, Two Worlds and In Between and Beneath an Oil-Dark Sea. She is currently writing her next novel, The Starkeeper, and has recently published two short story collections, Dear Sweet Filthy World (Subterranean Press, 2017) and Houses under the Sea: Mythos Tales (Centipede Press, 2018).

*The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world
its own shame.*

—OSCAR WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

1



DIDN'T FIND THE BOOKS. YES, HAD I BEEN THE ONE who found them, it's likely I would have paid what the estate sale in Newport was asking, but that doesn't change the fact, simple and irrelevant as it may be, that I am not the one who bought the books. Can a woman be deemed guilty of sins she only *might* have committed, if she'd had the opportunity? Idiotic choice of words, *sin*. Or, for that matter, *peccancy*. In all the world there is no sin, and I doubt if in all the cosmos there is sin, as antiquated and useless a concept as is a flat earth and a six-day creation. In his biography of Aleister Crowley, *Perdurabo* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2002, 2010), Richard Kaczynski writes of that self-proclaimed *bête noire*, "If everybody was so mistaken about God, they could also be wrong about sin. Thus he decided to become a sinner. But not just any sinner: with the same zeal he showed over the theological poser of Christ's three days in the grave, Alec decided to become the world's best sinner." He was then, I think, fifteen, and so can be forgiven for believing in such a foolish notion. I can hardly say the same for me, who would not come to understand this fundamental amorality until I was nearing the end of my thirties. Thirty-eight, to be precise, two days after Maggie brought the cardboard box of books to me from the aforementioned estate sale. You think, for what she'd paid, they'd have placed them in something more durable and dignified than an old Campbell's Tomato Soup box. Then again, perhaps nothing would have suited them more.

"I'd rather you not keep them here," I told her, and she looked taken aback.

"I didn't say I was going to leave them here."

"I just don't want them around," I said, and went back to watching the rain pattering against the bedroom window. It was May, though it was the

sort of May that still felt like March. I've lived in Providence for twelve years, and I still cannot get used to the protracted springs.

"It's only a box of books," Maggie said, almost whispering. She took a cigarette from the pack on the nightstand and lit it. The air smelled a little less like sex and rain and mold. It's a nice enough apartment (ought to be, for what I pay), but in wet weather the stink of mold seeps up from the basement.

"I'm taking them home with me," she said. "I never planned to do anything else with them." Her nostrils leaked grey smoke. I wanted to ask her for a cigarette, but I didn't. It seemed, in that moment, as if the request would constitute some manner of apology or change of heart.

"When did shit like old books start to bother you?" she asked and stared down at her naked breasts. "Did you become superstitious behind my back? Is this some cryptic religiosity I've not been privy to, or is it something else entirely?"

The rain looked cold enough to freeze a person alive. I'd only have to open the window to prove that suspicion.

"Hell, I'll get a mint for those things on eBay," she added. "It's not like we couldn't use the money. When's the last time you—"

I've skipped ahead. I'm rushing the narrative probably, which I know, already, will come out in disconnected portions, episodes, dollops, globs. *Dollops* seems like the most appropriate word, knowing now what I know. No, wrong. Beginning to suspect now what I only just begin to suspect. But knowing of a certain, there is no knowing.

I was pretending to work on a painting when Maggie showed up with the cardboard box. She let herself in, as always, but I'd set my brush and palette aside as soon as I'd heard her at the door. It's not as though she was actually interrupting me, was it? In truth, I was thankful for the distraction. She came into my studio, and there was a kiss, and the usual casual bits of conversation that are necessary, integral to all relationships, and yet never actually add up to anything. Then I noticed the box. No, that's a lie. I'd noticed the box immediately; so, rather, that's when I chose to broach the subject of the battered Campbell's Tomato Soup box. Maggie was always a sucker for estate sales, and both our places were chockablock with the junk she brought home from them. She had a whole ceramic bowl of skeleton keys, another of typewriter keys, and every windowsill was lined with

ancient doorknobs. She frequently talked about selling off some of the shit on eBay or to antique dealers, but she never managed to part with anything she brought home. So, that day in May, I figured the cardboard box contained nothing more remarkable than more of the same. I asked her what she'd scrounged this time, not really wanting to know, the question filled with even less enthusiasm than I had that day for the painting on my easel.

"Books," she said, and I was surprised, because books were not on her usual bill of fare. Perhaps, I thought, they were books about skeleton keys, typewriter keys, or old doorknobs. "I don't know bupkis about books, but, right off, I knew there was something unusual about this lot, so . . . you know how it is."

I knew exactly how it was. I know, now, had it only been a matter of lugging home stray kittens, she'd still be here.

Maggie set the box on the floor between us, then stood up, staring down at it. I glanced at it, then stared at her.

She said, "I almost didn't buy them, but I remembered how you took that history of book binding class at RISD, so I thought you might know whether they're worth anything or not."

"Maggie, I took that class seven years ago," I told her.

"Well, yeah. But it won't hurt you to have a look, will it?"

I imagine people say shit like that all the time, believing it to be true.

"Well, I can't see anything through a closed box." I was beginning to get annoyed with her, though I couldn't then say why. I'm not even sure I know why now, after everything that has (and will yet) transpire. But it was me who sat down by the legs of my stool and opened the box. It was me who played Pandora.

And people, I have found, even scholars, are quite entirely divided on the subject of Pandora (Πανδώρα). Popular view, she opened a box and released evil into the world. See, of course, Eve (יְהוָה, Ḥawwâh), who ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and so heralded the fall of mankind. But Pandora, also the first woman (no doubt men wrote these myths, if they *were* written and are not *history*, in which case women may not be as benign as we wish to imagine ourselves). But Pandora, who, like Eve, was the first woman. Return to the matter of her, and to confusion surrounding her fabled deed. More precisely, what was contained in the

fabled box, or jar (see Hesiod). One thing remained in the jar, according to some. And it is called by Hēsíodos *elpis*— proper translation a matter of some contention—and ignoring the warnings of Prometheus, Epimetheus accepts the jar (or box) as a gift from Pandora, and, in so doing, he scatters the contents, and thus “the earth and sea are full of evils,” excepting *elpis*, which was not released. But there is much disagreement, as I have indicated already, as to the proper rendering of *elpis*: maybe “hope,” or maybe the “expectation of evil” (*vel sim*). And is the jar a prison for hope (or the expectation of evil), or is it a vessel holding it safe for humanity? And I have digressed, and this is mere rambling, whether or not it will prove to be relevant. No— it *will* prove to be relevant, because, at the behest of Maggie, I did *play* Pandora. But, still, I *am* rambling.

Some of what is to follow may seem . . . extravagant in speech. Surely exaggerated, *surely*. But I won’t make an apology for that. These are honest recollections. You’ll make of all this whatever you will; apologia would hardly change that.

I sat down beside my stool and opened the box.

“I only paid thirty dollars,” she said. “Thirty bucks for eleven books. They were asking forty-five, but I haggled.”

Maggie was known far and wide as an infamous estate-sale haggler.

I opened the box, which wasn’t taped shut, but only kept closed by the overlapping of the lid’s four cardboard flaps. At first, there were only the smells one would expect from eleven very old books held inside a Campbell’s Tomato Soup box. The musty smell of old paper, mostly, but under that, a subtler hint of equally aged leather. And a peculiar sourness I was unable to identify. These were my *first* impressions. Olfactory.

“I thought about stopping by Myopic Books on the way home,” she said, “but decided I’d get better prices from eBay.”

For you who do not live in Providence, Myopic Books is a used bookshop at Wayland Square, east of College Hill. I will never cease to wish she’d unloaded her windfall on those unsuspecting booksellers. When I’m not wishing she’d never gone to that estate sale. When I’m not wishing . . . never mind. This way lies infinite fucking regression.

I looked into the box, expecting to see only worn cloth and leather covers. That *should* have been my second and visual impression. But what I saw instead was a darkness so profound that for a fleeting moment I

entertained two equally absurd possibilities: 1) that light had never entered that box, and 2) that whatever lay within the box was, like the singularity at the core of a black hole, devouring any light that *might* enter the box. I actually shuddered, but I didn't look away. I started to say something. I still wonder what, if anything, Maggie might have seen on my face. But then the darkness was gone, and I was only gazing at two neat stacks of old books.

"Most of them are in superb condition," she said, a suggestion of pride in her voice. It's her voice I still miss most of all.

I removed them one by one, examined each in turn, then carefully set them on the floor beside me. Sorry, Mags, but the books were, for the most part, in pretty *poor* condition. But books were not her forté (as I've noted), so I can't really blame her for misjudging their general state of preservation. All appeared to retain their original covers, the original bindings. Five had the titles impressed or printed on the spines and/or covers; it was necessary for me to open the remaining six to learn the titles, titles and subtitles and authors and years of first publication or reissue. At times, I was unable to open the covers more than a few centimeters before leather, leather-covered paste board, or cloth began to flake or crack, bits of binding falling to the hardwood and eliciting winces from Maggie. I didn't have to tell her she'd been wrong about the shape they were in. She could clearly see that much for herself.

I'd never heard of even a single one of these volumes, but that was hardly a surprise. All of them were devoted to various occult subjects, near as I could tell. Some seemed to be actual grimoires. Not *my* forté. Only a couple were in English. But I'll come to all these particulars a little farther along, to the particulars of each one.

"So what do you think?" Maggie asked hesitantly. I stared up at her for a moment, then glanced back to the book, the last one from the box, a thick bradel-bound affair in German. The title was embossed in Deutsch Gothic—*Von unaussprechlichen Kulte*n—and the author listed below (in the same gaudy typeface) that as one Friedrich Wilhelm von Junzt. Both were printed in a red so deep I'd call it claret.

"I think I'm not the person to appraise these things," I replied. The word *things* seemed very apt, for reasons I did not then understand.

“Oh,” she said, and looked a little disappointed. Obviously, taking them to a professional appraiser was going to cut into her profits. I set the German book aside with the others. I didn’t like the way it *felt*. There, my third (and extremely vague) impression: tactile. It might only have been mold rubbing off onto my fingertips, some combination of mold and dust, only the book had felt oily, though I could plainly see it wasn’t.

I wanted to go to the bathroom sink and wash my hands, but I resisted the urge.

“So who do you think could tell me?”

Off the top of my head, I could only think of the Brattle Bookshop in Boston.

“There must be something closer than that,” she frowned.

“Probably. I just don’t know, Mags. How about you try looking on the Internet, or maybe calling someone at the Athenaeum. Or, better yet, RISD.”

She said yeah, that was probably the best course of action, and then she put the books back into the box. I looked down at my hands, which still felt oily, and it suddenly occurred to me that, if I’d been more conscientious, I’d have washed my hands before handling Maggie’s estate score. There were green and blue smears of dry acrylic paint on my hands, some not even quite dry, smears which might easily have rubbed off on the antiques. I apologized, showed her my palms, but when she hurriedly checked the covers of the books there weren’t any stains.

“Lucky,” she sighed, relieved and managing a smile.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “Very lucky.” Then I rubbed my palms against my overalls, trying to rub away that oily sensation, just as I was trying not to think about the black hole I’d thought I saw when I opened the box.

We can safely, I think, return now to the day in bed, the rainy day, some forty-eight hours (give or take, mostly take) after the books were brought to my apartment on Dexter Street. I stared out at the rain, through the rain at the sodden part and the green trees and grass and the cloudy sky.

“I’ll take them with me when I go,” Maggie said.

“I’m not trying to be a prick,” I told her.

“I know,” she replied.

And I changed the subject. "I think it's going to rain all damn week," I said. She neither agreed nor disagreed. She crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the nightstand, got out of bed, and dressed. She pulled on the cable-knit sweater I bought her when we were in Ireland last autumn. It's a sort of oatmeal color, with surprisingly tasteful green shamrocks. The morning was almost gone, and she had to get to work.

"We'll get dinner out tonight," she said, before she left. "Decide what you'd like before I get back, okay?"

"Sure. Maybe that Abyssinian place on Wickenden."

"I could live with that," she said, then leaned across the bed and kissed me.

I stayed in bed maybe half an hour after Maggie left. I didn't want to work, didn't want to have to spend another day pretending to work on the painting that seemed to have no interest in my ever finishing it and so was determined not to cooperate.

But when I finally did get up, I realized she'd forgotten the box of books. They were still right there on the floor beside my stool.

2



IN THE WEEKS TO COME, I WOULD BEGIN TO understand those books, as they would begin to understand me, and this same arrangement would apply to Maggie, though in a different and, ultimately, more malign sense. I hope I do not seem especially calm or especially rational as I write this all down; I'll never again be either. Regardless, the books were never removed from my place. I asked her a few more times to take them home with her. She lived over on the east side of town, at the foot of College Hill. From her front room, you could look out across the Old North Burial Ground. I'd ask her to remove the books, and she'd promise she would, but then she'd leave without them. I could never decide if it was something passive-aggressive or if she didn't want them around any more than I did. I know it wasn't forgetfulness, as she never was the absentminded sort.

As I began to understand those books, and they began to understand me, they . . . how do I say this? They told me stories. Or I learned stories

from them. I don't mean this in the usual sense that one learns stories from books, by reading them. I mean something else, which I'm still (and I suspect always will be) at a loss to explain. I was drawn back to them repeatedly, never mind my loathing for the sight, smell, and feel of the things. Even the noises they made, the crackling of ancient pages and binding. Sometimes I would handle them with mittens or gloves.

I began to understand the books, and they began to understand me. See Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146 [1886]), "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you." One of those quotes that's repeated with such frequency it becomes tiresome, but few others could be, in this instance, more germane. Each of those books is an abyss, or a monster, or an abyss in which dwell monsters beyond counting—take your pick. Only, I don't think I fought very hard. Curiosity, our species' old friend of questionable intent (I'd prefer not to speak in such a teleological manner, but to do otherwise would only obscure).

I began to understand the books.

They told me stories.

Count among them a tale I gleaned from the Latin volume, *De Vermis Mysteriis*. One of the volumes best described, from what I could tell, as a grimoire. Though I do not speak Latin, I was able to gather that this particular book was supposedly authored by an alchemist named Ludvig Prinn during the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The copy from the box wasn't that old, but seems to be an 1888 French reprint.

De Vermis Mysteriis.

Mysteries of the Worm.

Oh, I should mention that someone had scrawled a few scraps of translation in the margins. These notes appeared to be quite old, in a spidery hand that suggested they'd been made with a fountain pen or perhaps even a quill. In each case, the translated lines were underlined, with a neatly drawn arrow pointing to the gloss. An example: *A tenebris inter diem noctemque observant et semper vigilant*, with a sepia arrow leading me to "From darkness between day and night they watch, and are ever vigilant." ~ S. T. 1912 (only a very few of the translations were initialed and dated).

But I did not say that I read stories from the awful books Mags had found in Newport. I said they *told* me stories, and they did so voicelessly. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that they *showed* me stories, like movies of the mind.

For example:

I learned of an Englishwoman who, on January 4, 1853, tried to summon something using *De Vermis Mysteriis*. Possibly this very copy, or possibly some other. Her name must have been irrelevant, because I never did learn that; I only know the date because of a curious and intricate sort of clock on her wall that noted the time, day, month, phases of the moon, and various sorts of zodiacal information. The woman stands naked on a chair that sat within a sort of double, interwoven circle. I can't be sure what the circle has been traced from. My imagination usually assumes salt and blood, no matter how cliché that assumption might be. The woman's hair is auburn, and very long, reaching almost to her lower back. I know her name is Harriett, and that she was once a schoolmistress somewhere in Surrey. The room isn't dark, but lit by flickering gas jet behind glass fixtures on the walls. Her skin glistens with oil or grease. Her arms hang at her sides, and in her left hand is a dagger with an oddly wavy, asymmetrical blade, while her right hand holds a dried bundle of lavender, rosemary, and rue. From a ceiling beam hangs a noose of jute rope, just slightly behind her. For a long time she stands very still, as still as I would have thought only a statue could stand. I have noticed the book lying open on the floor in front of her, in front of the chair. It appears to be a much newer copy than the one from the cardboard box, but obviously can't be from the 1888 printing.

Harriett drops the herbs, then raises the dagger, which I have since learned is referred to as a *kris*. She mutters Latin (at least it sounds to me like Latin), and then she's speaking English. All at once, it seems as though the gas jets have been shut off. The room *beyond* her circle has been swallowed by a darkness, but *only* the room beyond her circle. She calls to a being named Mynarthitep, and the darkness begins to swirl, to writhe, and now it's shot through with iridescent threads that put me in mind of a sheen of motor oil on water. Without knowing how I know, I do know that this Mynarthitep is an angry god— possessed of a propensity to put Jehovah to shame—and that merely speaking its name can call down a

terrible wrath. I know it has entered the room, and is now wrapped tightly as the coils of a constricting serpent about that circle, which is beginning to give way as Mynarthitep squeezes tighter and tighter.

“Fair enough,” Harriett says, almost whispering. “I wished only to look upon your face, as so few ever have, and now I’ve done that, haven’t I?” And she slices a long gash between her breasts. Blood oozes down her belly and drips to the floor. There’s a sound, then, that makes me think of those old black-and-white submarine movies set during World War II, when a sub has to dive deeper than it should, and the water pressure threatens to crumple it. Harriett has gone more deeply than her protective circle was designed to go, and now it is on the verge of implosion. But, still, she dutifully offers this dark god her own blood. The circle breaks, as she slips the noose about her neck and kicks the chair out from under her. It screams, Mynarthitep, and I know that Harriett, who once was a mere schoolmistress in Surrey, has somehow cheated a god.

This is only one among the hundreds of stories given to me by the eleven books Mags brought into my apartment that day in May. I see little point in writing any of the others down, though I still may. Keeping them to myself is almost unbearable, and even the release of just that one has made the load lighter. So we’ll see. By “we,” I suppose I mean “I” and nothing more.

I’ll see.

3



WHAT FOLLOWS IS A SERIES OF EPISODES, RELATING, to varying degrees, to Mags’ cardboard box of books. I did warn of the fractured, episodic nature of this narrative. The dollops by which this “story” would be delivered, did I not, way back at the beginning? And yes, I do assume this is a “story” that will be read, as I have discovered an extremely small esoteric journal with an even smaller readership which, I think, will be glad to have this strange document. One whose editors and subscribers will, readily and eagerly, not view it as merely fictional, but as fact almost concealed by the conspiracy that hides the genuine face of the world from ignorant eyes. Myself, I believe in no such organized or

purposeful conspiracy. It may only be the nature of the mind of women and men, that we have evolved down the hazardous course of our genus' two(+)-million-year history to perceive our environment in such a way that is most advantageous to humankind's consciousness, so that evolution is the sole conspirator here. Mind is merely the function of brain, and there is no reason to suspect that psychology is any less at the mercy of natural selection than is the structure of the brain; indeed, to believe so would be entirely absurd.

And I have already faced too many absurd things in too short a time.

I

 DID MAKE AN INQUIRY CONCERNING THOSE ELEVEN books. Not to a librarian at the Providence Athenaeum or the library of the Rhode Island School of Design. This was a week or so after Maggie had brought the books to my home (and then refused to remove them). Instead, I called a shop in Marblehead, Massachusetts, a shop that purported to specialize in texts concerned with the “occult, magick, witchcraft, and demonology.” I admit that the shop’s proximity to Salem, with its unfortunate history and the grotesque tourist trade that thrives upon that history, made me wary. But it was the first such shop I encountered online, and I really wasn’t in the mood to look for any others. I asked about four of the titles by name. A nervous man (at least, he sounded nervous) cut me off after the fourth and wanted to know if this were a joke. I assured him it wasn’t, that the books were very real, that I was on the up-and-up, that all eleven were stacked on the table in front of me, and I could read from one if he wished. He hung up on me. I stared at the receiver for a long time before returning it to the phone’s cradle. And I thought, *She’s going to have a lot more trouble unloading these things than she suspects.* She, of course, being Mags.

II





TEN DAYS AFTER MAGGIE BROUGHT THE BOX HOME from Newport (which happened, by the way, to be the fifteenth, a Wednesday), I had cause to drive along Atwells Avenue, skirting Federal Hill on some errand or another. It's a bad part of town—Federal Hill, I mean—and not a part I make a habit of lingering in. I cannot even recall what the errand was, but I needed to reach the turnoff onto the highway, southbound (I think)—that much I do remember. And at the corner of Atwells and Sutton, I passed an abandoned and decaying church. A sign outside identified it as St. John's Roman Catholic Church. It was built all of redbrick and marble, and the blocky steeple faced Atwells. I'm not even sure I'd call it a steeple, as it was topped not by a traditional spire, but a peculiar variation of mansard roof, capped with a modest cross. Near the top, there was a single lancet window on each of the tower's four sides. From a purely architectural standpoint, I cannot say there was anything especially imposing about the building. I was not raised Christian, and they've never inspired in me any sort of default reverence. The beauty and grandeur of truly spectacular examples, or those with great historical significance, are not lost on me—such as the First Baptist Meetinghouse on Benefit Street, which happens to be the first Baptist church built in America (1774– 1775). But this derelict building on Atwells Avenue, it had about it both a pronounced plainness *and* a very discernible sinister atmosphere. Somehow, it managed to appear ordinary and unspeakably unwholesome at the same time, as if sporting some unsuccessful camouflage. A mask through which its eyes were all too visible, and don't they say that the eyes are the windows to the soul?

I didn't pull over for a better look, though some fraction of me very much wanted to do just that. A much larger fraction of me had no thought but to keep driving and not look back, and also to wish I'd never set eyes on the place. I wondered, vaguely, how I'd come this same route so many times before and never once before noticed the place.

I went on about that Wednesday's errands, whatever they may have been, and it must have been an unremarkable Wednesday in every other respect.

It wasn't until early June that I happened to remember the church. Mags and I were having dinner at a Mediterranean place on Atwells, and I mentioned that place. I described it, all the details I could recall. Maggie

furrowed her brow and picked at her salad a moment, and then she said, "That's very strange."

"Why? Why is that very strange?" I stopped eating and stared across the booth at her. She stopped picking at her salad and stared back at me. I'm not sure if the expression on her face was more confusion or concern.

"St. John's was torn down back in the nineties. Ninety-two, I think. There wasn't much left, because it had burned, but what was left was demolished. There's nothing there now but an ugly little park. Are you sure . . . ?"

The question seemed to trail off unfinished, or maybe it didn't. Either way, it hung there between us for a minute or so, and then I got up and almost ran to the restroom. She followed me and held my hair back from my face while I vomited into the toilet. When I was done, she wiped my lips clean with a wad of tissue.

III



EARLY THAT JULY I WAS READING, FOR THE FIRST time, Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). He devotes most of Chapter 13 to an encounter he, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, and the crew of the *Western Flyer* had with a tiny island south of Isla San José. Steinbeck writes:

A small dark islet had caught our attention as we came in [to Amortajada Bay]. For though the day was bright this islet, called Cayo on the map, looked black and mysterious. We had the feeling something strange and dark had happened there or that it was the ruined work of men's hands. Cayo is only a quarter of a mile long and a hundred yards wide. Its northern end is a spur and its southern end is a flat plateau about forty feet high. Even in the distance it had a quality which we called "burned." One knows there will be few animals on a "burned" coast; that animals will not like it . . . Whether this is the result of a deadly chemistry we cannot say. . . .

There is so much strange about this islet we will not set much of it down. It is nearly all questions . . . There is no landing place; all approaches are strewn with large sea-rounded boulders which even in fairly still water would beat the bottom out of a boat. On its easterly side, as we approach, a cliff rises in back of a rocky beach and there are a number of shallow caves in the cliffside. Set in the great boulders in the intertidal there are large iron rings and lengths of big chain, but so rusted they came off in our hands. Also, set into the cliff six to eight feet above the beach, are other iron rings with loops eight inches in diameter. They look very old . . . In the shallow caves in the cliffs there were evidences of many fires having been built . . .

The crew encountered only a single animal on all Cayo, “one large black crow that shrieked at us with dislike, and when we approached flew off.” Upon revisiting the shallow caves, before returning to the sanctuary of the *Western Flyer*, they noticed the bones and shells of sea turtles, a great quantity of clam shells, “and scrawled in what appeared to be charcoal and pigments, many unnerving pictographs or hieroglyphics. Rational men do not speak of blasphemy or of witchcraft, but I think we all felt we’d come upon the source of the island’s ‘burning.’”

Ed Ricketts was struck by a train on May 11, 1948, near his home and lab in Monterey, and among his papers and notebooks was found a series of sketches reproducing the images from the walls of Cayo. I have found three symbols *identical* to these in one of the books from Mags’ box. They can be found midway through François-Honoré Balfour’s *Cultes des Goules* (Paris, 1702). I don’t read French and have no wish to know what the accompanying text might reveal to me.

IV



OUR YEARS AGO, A FEW MONTHS AFTER I MET Maggie Ellen Morse, we visited the National Museum of Illustration. I’d never been, but Mags had, and she wanted me to see it. And (the exorbitant

admission fee aside) it was, for the most part, a wonder. The museum is contained by Vernon Court, an estate designed by John Mervyn Carrère and Thomas Hastings of Carrère & Hastings, and the interior was conceived by the firm of Jules Allard et ses fils of Paris. A beautiful and ghostly dream of that lost and secretly venomous “Gilded Age.” Vernon Court was completed in 1898, so it was one hundred and thirteen years old upon the occasion of our visit.

The collection, though, concerned me far more than that cold and ostentatious tomb of a mansion. I saw pieces by N. C. Wyeth, Elizabeth S. Green, Maxfield Parrish, Howard Pyle, Coles Phillips, and . . . too many to name. I did my best to avoid the kitschy Norman Rockwells. But there was this one canvas, created by a painter of whom I’d never even heard, and whose name I’ll not set down here. I will briefly describe the painting.

Three young women, all nude, kneeling and heads bowed, so that it is difficult to see anything more of them but their backs, shoulders, buttocks, the soles of their feet. Each has blond hair so long it reaches along to the black stone floor. Before them floats an emaciated figure (it is impossible to say if it is male or female) who seems clothed in nothing but a long yellow robe; its face is hidden by the robe’s hood. The figure is pointing towards a wall behind it (which seems to be built of the same black stone as the floor on which the three girls kneel). Upon the wall a single symbol has been painted, something almost (but not quite) akin to the Greek triskelion (τρισκέλιον), and the figure is clearly motioning towards it with one gray and almost skeletal hand, though, with their heads bowed, none of the three women can possibly be looking *at* the floating entity in yellow. Perhaps they have already seen it, and this is *why* their heads are lowered.

The painting is dated 1899.

1888. 138. 1898. 1948. 1866.

1853. 1899. 1912.

1951.

Numerology is for idiots.

I stared at that painting for a very long time, until Mags asked why I found it so fascinating. I couldn’t tell her then. I could tell her now. I could point to one of her eleven books, all of which are still in my apartment, and none of which have been listed on eBay.

V



FOURTEEN DAYS AFTER THE BOOKS ARRIVED, THE phone rang. I answered, expecting Maggie, or a friend, or my mother. Instead, it was a librarian acquaintance of mine from the Rhode Island Historical Society. I'd sent him an email, inquiring about the history of the demolished church at the corner of Atwells and Sutton (which I dreamt of twice since that Wednesday), and I'd indicated he should feel free to reply by either email or phone, as I knew he was something of a latter-day Luddite and disliked email.

Skip the pleasantries.

"It had a few unsavory incidents in its past," he said. "Most notably, it became ground zero for a pagan mystery religion known as the Church of Starry Wisdom, an adherent of which purchased the church building sometime in 1844. Possibly that May, but the details are hazy. The guy's name was Enoch Bowen, an Egyptologist. Anyway, before Professor Bowen bought the place, it was known as the Freewill Church."

"Egypt," I said very softly, gazing out the window at nothing in particular.

"So," he continued, "for the next thirty-three years, local pastors preached against the Starry Wisdom, and the tales of its practices grew wilder and wilder. There were claims of blood sacrifices, devil worship, sexual perversion, the kidnappings of locals for those wicked rituals, secret languages, and some sort of immense and unholy artifact Owen had brought back to the States with him from Africa—the whole shebang.

"Doesn't look as if the Starry Wisdom congregation ever numbered more than a couple of hundred, but that seemed more than enough to throw local Baptists and Roman Catholics into a state of near histrionics. Then there was some sort of riot at the church in 1869, led by a mob of Irish boys following the disappearance of one of their own, a young man named Patrick Regan. Finally, in April of '77, the church closed its doors, and a hundred and eighty-one members of the congregation are said to have fled the city before the end of the year. The cult drops off the radar after that, though there are rumors it might have resurfaced, at least briefly, in Yorkshire, England, in 1880."

There was a pause, and then I asked, “That’s all you have?”

“Almost,” he replied. “Frankly, this next bit is such bullshit I considered not even passing it along.”

“Don’t stop now,” I told him.

“Okay, lady. But you asked for it. In 1849, there was supposedly a deathbed confession by a member of the Starry Wisdom, a fellow named Francis X. Feeney. He described that artifact Bowen was supposed to have brought back with him from Egypt. Called it the ‘Shining Trapezohedron.’ All this reached a certain Father O’Malley, who played a pivotal role in the Starry Wisdom being driven out of Providence. Anyway, Feeney apparently described this ‘Shining Trapezohedron’ thing as a sort of portal for summoning an ancient, evil god which could only be banished by bright light.”

“Not much of an evil god,” I said, “if you can scare it off with a flashlight.” But there were chill bumps on my arms.

“Some sort of writer named Robert Blake—”

“Like that guy played Baretta?”

“Yeah. Like him. Blake wrote some really awful stuff, pulp short stories back in the late thirties, after he moved back to Providence from Milwaukee. You know, for *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Stories*, and suchlike. Took a room on College Hill. So Mr. Blake, apparently being of a morbid bent, becomes obsessed with the old church on Atwells and breaks in a few times. Seems the Starry Wisdom left a lot behind when they fled, mostly ancient mystical tomes, blah, blah, blah, and maybe Blake even stole a few of these. But he definitely claimed to have found, in the bell tower, this ‘Shining Trapezohedron,’ and it seems to have driven him insane. Literally, if you believe this crap—and I do not, by the way—it scared him to death, right? Not long after that, a Dr. Dexter—can’t find out anything about him, might have been a professor at Brown, maybe, but I’m not sure—found the wooden box with the artifact, and was so frightened by it and by Blake’s notes that he claimed to have dropped the thing into the East Passage of Narragansett Bay, somewhere off Conanicut Island.”

I licked my lips. My lips were very dry.

“You’re not making any of this shit up?”

“Scout’s honor.”

“You were a Boy Scout?”

“Figure of speech.”

“Thank fuck for that,” I said, and I tried to laugh. More pleasantries, and I can’t remember who hung up first. But I sat staring out the window for a long time, until dark. There was an especially brilliant sunset, as if the sky were burning down. I tried to stop thinking about a antidipyramidal *n*-gonal symbol depicted repeatedly in the *Livre d’Eibon*, another French volume from Maggie’s cardboard box. I thought about the figure, and a mathematics professor in college I’d had a crush on in my freshmen year of college. She’d done her dissertation on the repetition of crystalline arrangements within trapezohedral cells. I wanted to impress her, so I found it through interlibrary loan and tried to read it. But I was never much for geometry, and, besides, the crush . . . well, they never last very long, do they?

4



I’M COMING TO THE END OF THIS. OR I’M COMING TO the end of what I will permit myself to write about the incidents that followed Mags bringing those books back from Newport, then leaving them with me. More and more, that part of it seems intentional. It isn’t difficult, no great leap, to imagine her purchasing them on a whim, and then, on the way home from Newport, realizing she wanted nothing to do with them. So she left them with me. Or—and I dislike entertaining this notion, but here it is all the same—it may be the books coerced her into purchasing them, but then they found me more receptive and so saw to it she left them here.

Blake might have stolen some of the Starry Wisdom’s library.

Why did Owen and company leave them behind?

And how did they get to a Newport estate sale, if these are the *same* books? Isn’t that the most parsimonious explanation, that these *are* the same copies? Introduce as few unnecessary questions and speculation as possible.

Questions are my enemy. Ignorance is my ally.

I return to the rainy morning where this “narrative” began, before I skipped backwards and foolishly attempted to commit an act of coherency.

We were not making love, nor were we merely having sex. Fucking is the only word that approaches the truth of it, and that, too, is inaccurate. She was on top, and she was never on top. She ground her hips violently against mine as if she meant to crush me with the weight of her, the *fact* of her. I saw something in her blue eyes that had always escaped my attention, or which had never been there. You see it in the eyes of caged predators. A big cat at the zoo, a wolf behind bars, a grizzly bear in a cramped circus wagon. It was hateful. There, I wrote it down. It *was* hateful, and it was vicious. She might have torn my throat out in that moment, and I would have been not the least bit surprised. I wouldn't have resisted. By then, I understood how far we'd been dragged away from sanity by those goddamn filthy books. I understood much too much, and I was slipping towards resigned. I understood that Mags had decided, like Crowley at fifteen, to be the world's best sinner. Even if, as I have stated, sin is only an illusion bequeathed to minds that would prefer not to fathom the truth of an indifferent universe.

She gripped my wrists and bent low over me, baring her teeth. Her thighs held my hips as firmly as any iron vise might have. Her breath smelled like ammonia and dusty places. Her breath might have smelled like the slow, inevitable rot of antique, silverfish-riddled books. It flowed around me as the sea flows around a granite boulder.

"I see things I never knew before," she said, smiling. Her voice almost wasn't her voice. It was almost a voice I'd never heard from her before. There was almost an accent I might have thought was Greek or Turkish. "Light is dark, and dark is light."

I didn't reply. I couldn't think. There was hardly anything left of my senses but the sense of her body and the hot press of her body against mine.

"I have never been so starved," she whispered, and then she leaned closer, nipping my left earlobe hard enough to draw blood. I felt the pain, but it seemed somehow far, far away. She sat up again, and her lips were red. There was a smear of crimson on her pale chin.

"If I devoured you, as I am being devoured, would you struggle?"

"I wouldn't," I replied, words that were as small as a mote of dust drifting in near-vacuum filling up the space and time between stars. "I couldn't."

Nothing else was said, not until that violence of flesh and bone and fucking.

I might have dozed. I might have dreamed of the church that was torn down nineteen years before I saw it. When I opened my eyes, it was to the cold May rain pattering against the bedroom window. Mags was already awake. She was sitting up, staring at the doorway, or the hall beyond the open door. I didn't ask.

Later, I hesitantly gently touched my ear lobe. There was a drying crust of blood, so I knew it hadn't been a nightmare.

"I just don't want them around," I told her.

"When did shit like old books start to bother you? Did you become superstitious behind my back?" I didn't answer the question, but I was relieved her voice was only her voice again.

"I'd rather you not keep them here, that's all," I said. "I feel like it's not an accident that you keep forgetting that box."

She laughed. Can a woman be deemed guilty of sins she only *might* have committed if she'd had the opportunity? Idiotic choice of words, *sin*. Or, for that matter, *peccancy*. No, she can't. Not if in all the world there is no sin, and I've already said exactly that. I've said that in precisely those same words.

I'm trying to come to the end of this.

Or at least a place where I can stop.

5



BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THE BOOKS.

They told me stories.

Did I say I intended to write out a checklist of the eleven books, their titles, dates of publication, authors, et al.? I remember doing so, but flipping back through the pages, reading back over them, I can't find where I said that. So, maybe I didn't.

False memories. Those may play a greater role than I have given them credit for. Actually, I don't think I've mentioned the subject, no matter its potential relevance. Unless I did, but like the promised annotated checklist I never promised to make, but recall having done so, all evidence to the

contrary. (See Schacter, Daniel L. 2001. *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Remembers and Forgets*, and also Loftus, Elizabeth. 1980. *Memory: Surprising New Insights into How We Remember and Why We Forget*, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.). I'll not here broach the problem of how "false memory syndrome" may in and of itself be a falsehood. I don't have the sort of dubious false memories recovered in hypnosis that lead people to claim they were abducted by UFOs, or the equally dubious sort "recovered" by some psychologists to bolster claims of sexual abuse. I mean, more simply, a phenomenon we have all experienced.

We have all fallen victim to those moments of absentminded confusion.

Didn't I already do that? I could have sworn . . .

I mean only that, so maybe you should ignore Schacter and Loftus.

Regardless, I've decided not to make that catalog of the eleven books. I have my reasons. Several of them. The memory of some things is best not perpetuated, but systematically removed from history. If I believed in sin, I would say this is a *necessary* sin. Committing knowledge, however malicious oblivion. For the "greater good."

If there were sin, we could call this *heroic* sin.

Though I am surely no hero.

I am nothing but a byproduct of happenstance.

It's okay if you think I'm rambling. I think I am, as well.

6



IF I BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THE BOOKS, MAGGIE did something far more profound than learn the stories they had to tell. She did much, much more than listen. She absorbed, and in so doing, she was changed utterly. Maybe that's why the books were left with me. She may not have intended me any harm (and, of course, I prefer to believe this), but unconsciously she might have been aware that by stumbling upon and then allowing the books to persuade her to buy them for only thirty dollars, she'd contracted something not so different from a virus. William Burroughs: "Now your virus is an obligate cellular parasite and my

contention is that evil is quite literally a virus parasite occupying a certain brain area" (*The Place of Dead Roads*, 1983).

And, "What scared you all into time? Into body. Into shit? I will tell you: *the word*. Alien Word *the*. '*The*' word of Alien Enemy imprisons '*thee*' in Time. In body. In shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open" (*Nova Express*, 1964).

My contention: Taken together, the eleven books contain the "genetic material made from either DNA or RNA, long molecules that carry genetic information; a protein coat that protects these genes; and in some cases an envelope of lipids that surrounds the protein coat when they are outside a cell." The books have been infected, or are themselves the infection, and the mission of the Starry Wisdom was to spread the infection as far as possible.

In this way it is no different from any church, any religion, any cult.

Any word, as Burroughs is saying (I think).

"... evil is quite literally a virus parasite occupying a certain brain area ..."

My mind successfully fought off the virus. Consciously or unconsciously, mental antibodies were engaged. But Mags, maybe she possessed no such antibodies, as Robert Blake may not have (but this mysterious Dr. Dexter may have). Fuck, I'm losing the sense of this. I made pages of notes, and still I'm losing the sense of this, the thread of my argument, augmented by the arguments of another.

I am afraid, for whatever reasons, Maggie may have gone so far as to invite, to welcome in, the virus encoded in the eleven books, which I may as well term *vectors*.

She would spend the night, and I would awaken to an empty bed. I would find her somewhere in the house, reading the books. She would make an excuse about being unable to sleep or a noise having awakened her. That sort of thing. I'd ask why, if she wanted to read the books, she didn't take them home with her. Usually, this earned me little more than a shrug. Once or twice, she grew angry at my asking. But always she came back to bed, and always, if I touched her for an hour or two afterwards, her skin would feel oily. And, eventually, I thought, I'd ask myself, *Is this a symptom of a disease? Is this her body attempting to repel the virus?* I watched for other symptoms. I might have seen them, and I might not have. Well,

except for sex on that rainy morning. There was a presence inside Mags that was not her. Or. She was already becoming what the virus would finally make of her, as she approached the end product of self-replication. The vector of those books having followed the process of all viruses: attachment to a host, penetration, the release of viral genomic nucleic acid *via* uncoating, replication, self-assembly, lysis (see Topley and Wilson's *Microbiology and Microbial Infections, Volume One: Virology*; 1998, 9th edition; but, also, 2008. Shors, Teri. *Understanding Viruses* [Jones and Bartlett Publishers]).

Maybe, following Burroughs . . . maybe I'd be best turning to panspermia and Francis Crick, hypotheses of exogenesis, viral molecules wafting between the stars.

Madness rides the star-wind.

I am coming to the end of this, which is to say, I have reached the place in this disjointed narrative where I have to say how it ended. The end product of Maggie Morse's infection, if an infection it *was* and I abandon all ideas of the "supernatural" and of demonic agencies.

It will seem (sound, strike one as) insane, because it *is* insane, but only by all the rules of existence we supposedly sane human beings have deemed sane. By the scientific laws which form our understanding of a sane universe. I can't apologize for a lunacy that I maintain is only *apparent*, as the readers have not witnessed this illusion of the *violation* of biology and physics for themselves. I can't resort to tautology, whether logical or rhetorical: This is insane because it violates our sane *notion* of the world, and our notion of the world is sane because *we* are sane, *ergo* anything which violates our sane notions is, by definition, insane. No. I'll not go there. I owe Mags just a little more than that. I can do better than Father fucking O'Malley did back in 1877. Can't I?

I began taking Vicodin (750mg, Watson 387, scored tabs), one an hour until sunrise. And drinking from a bottle of rye. So, to quote Mr. Josh Rouse, by way of the Walkabouts:

*Can you still prescribe,
The remedies and lies,
'Til we feel no pain?
'Til we all have risen?*

No, only the Walkabouts sang that; Rouse changed the lyrics.

And change, that's what I'm coming to, isn't it?

I found her this morning, and I know it was a few minutes after 3 A.M., because I glanced at the clock when I was getting out of bed. I woke, and she wasn't beside me, which has become not so unusual, just like her spending more nights here than at her own place has become not so unusual. I stood a moment in the bedroom doorway, staring down the hallway. Echoes here of that rainy morning in May, I know, but so much of what has transpired comes down to echoes. The cosmos silently clamors with the echoes of unseen drumbeats, and very few of us are ever so unfortunate as to ever hear them. The echoes. Echoes. Drumbeats. Viral DNA and RNA. Gods who are *not* gods, but only beings that transcend our understanding of "being." No sin, and no good. A code that defeats our hardwired binary expectations. Echoes which carry us down to a place where our post-bicameral consciousness and our computers are reduced to meaningless gibberish.

I didn't call out to her. I never did during those nights when I'd find her reading from one of the eleven books. My love said to me, before her white teeth drew my blood, "Light is dark, and dark is light." Yet reducing that to the simplicity of 01001100 01101001 01100111 01101000 01110100 00100000 01101001 01110011 00100000 01100100 01100001 01110010 01101011 00101100 00100000 01100001 01101110 01100100 00100000 01100100 01100001 01110010 01101011 00100000 01101001 01110011 00100000 01101100 01101001 01100111 01101000 01110100 would be worse than fallacious.

I stood a moment in the bedroom doorway, staring down the hallway. Then I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. After the kitchen, I paused before an unfinished canvas, wondering how many months would pass before (assuming "if") I were able to finish it. Thankfully, I was having much better luck with commissions, so I wasn't worrying about the rent, utilities, and so on and so forth. I set the half-empty glass of water on the little table beside my easel to share space with metal tubes of paint, a bottle of linseed oil, a scatter of brushes.

I found her on the scuffed hardwood floor next to the ratty chaise I'd inherited from my mother. These details seem, to me, infinitely more important than I believe they would to anyone else: *ratty*, *scuffed*, *inherited*,

et al. On the chaise itself one of the books lay open. *Von unaussprechlichen Kulturen*. Those calf-bound covers, signatures of vellum pages held together with sewing thread. What was left of Maggie—no, what Maggie had *become*—lay at my feet. It is critical to recall that this is not a process of reduction, but one of transformation. An invited transformation, dictated by the reproductive facilities of Burroughs' linguistic virus once it made the leap from gray matter to all the other cells of her body. I don't know exactly what I felt in that moment, and likely I never will. Maybe the virus has not yet (and never will) bestow upon the human brain that one perfect word that would describe the transformation of Maggie Ellen Morse. Maybe that's a mercy it granted us, if I dare ascribe to it the capacity for mercy.

Her trapezohedron didn't shine, but glinted wetly. Perhaps other eyes than mine were required to see the shine, or it may be the shine of her new form was contained within the tetragonal trapezohedron of her, the geometric boundaries of her square antiprism, that semiregular polyhedron. She measured no more than six inches across. Eight red-blue pulsing kite faces constructed of fibrous, connective tissue—muscle, epithelial tissue, fine networks of veins. If there were nerves, they were not visible to my naked eyes. The edges joining vertices were constructed all of living white bone. I didn't wonder if this were some *other* organism, possibly summoned from the book when Mags spoke an incantation aloud. I knew what I was seeing. I knew perfectly goddamn well what I was seeing there on the floor. I sat down a foot or so from it, and watched. At some point, I went to the bathroom to piss and find the bottle of Vicodin. I went to a cabinet in the kitchen for the bottle of rye. It is difficult for me to communicate the calm that had settled over me. There was no horror, no terror, no panic, and hardly even any sorrow. How can one mourn inevitabilities? Wait. Dumb question, as we've built too many religions around our inability to not grieve (and fear) the inevitability of death, yes?

I returned to her with the pills and liquor. If I spoke any words at all, I've forgotten them, each and every one. She'd passed over to other existence, though I will never know if she did so from desire or mishap or the lure of words contained in irresistible books (*id est*, viruses). Hardly matters, but I found it unlikely she would be able to hear me. It may be one may fall so deeply into language that one loses the aptitude to comprehend the speech of those Outside you. You have become, to use Charles Fort's

phrase, “a damned thing,” and you have done so through the aegis of “damned things.” *By the damned, I mean the excluded.* Excluded from the rational minds of rational women.

Dawn came, then a clear summer morning, and Mags seemed, I was certain, to draw in upon herself by the slightest of degrees. To flinch, I’d say . . . *described this “Shining Trapezohedron” thing as a sort of portal for summoning an ancient, evil god which could only be banished by bright light.* I went back to the bedroom, and in the top of the closet I found another thing I’d inherited from my dead mother—a cedar box large enough to contain the trapezohedron of once-human flesh. I did not like the feel of her, my skin against hers when I lifted her into the box, and I plan never to touch her again. It wasn’t so different from the greasiness I felt that first day, lifting one of the books from that Campbell’s Tomato Soup carton. I returned to the closet and placed the box on a high shelf. I have no intention of ever again opening that closet door, so long as I remain in this apartment.

I said something earlier about how I am writing something I mean to be read. I said something about an esoteric journal, but fuck all that. I’ll hide these pages as I have hidden her. But those eleven books . . .

I locked them in a small home safe I purchased at a gun shop in North Kingstown. Also, it wasn’t hard to discover the deepest point of Narragansett Bay (a few words typed into Google)—184 feet, 56 meters, in the East Passage, and this must be very close to where the enigmatic Dr. Dexter sunk the artifact worshipped by the congregation of the Starry Wisdom. I considered taking the Block Island Ferry, to consign the books to deeper waters than can be found in the bay. And I still can’t say why I did not. Maybe the virus had more of a hold on me than I thought, and they wished to be near the relic Prof. Bowen brought back with him from Egypt. I can’t know if that was the case. I did, I admit, consider burying Maggie in the same depths, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so.

And now I am making an end to this, my disjointed narrative.

Or, at least, I have come to a point where I can indulge in another illusion so precious to our minds, the illusion of endings. The sight of her transformation, the slick feel of her, what I saw and read within those drowned books. The fact that what she is now is kept safe in my bedroom. I can never find a vaccine for the virus. I will not even try.

I receive letters, sometimes, all postmarked from the same address in Yorkshire, England. I don't open them.

You Shadows That in Darkness Dwell

MARK HOWARD JONES

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HE'D WANTED TO GET LOST, CERTAINLY, BUT NOT *this* lost. The map he'd procured when he hired the boat was now useless.

After the strain of the last year, five days away, all alone, seemed like a good idea. A chance to clear his head. And God knows nobody would miss him. Certainly not his insolent daughter or her uninterested younger sister. Only his distant wife had raised any concerns, and those were mainly financial; she was in the midst of divorcing him, after all.

A hiking holiday would get him away from all that. It was intended to help him focus on what was important in his life. The trip down river had been almost spur-of-the-moment.

He'd come upon the small boatyard by accident after getting lost. Despite some initial language problems, the old man who ran it had been very helpful and told him where he'd taken the wrong path. But before he could begin retracing his steps, he'd been drawn to a small boat with a motor.

A keen canoeist in his youth, he was sure he could handle the small boat. And it wasn't the boat that was the problem. He had now sailed off the edge of the map—literally and metaphorically.

Simply turning the boat around was not an option; he'd hit some white water earlier in the day. He'd never be able to make his way upstream past that . . . and the banks were too steep simply to haul even his small boat onto dry land and go around.

At the first likely-looking spot, he'd heaved to and dragged the boat up onto the shallow bank. Making sure he'd tied it to a sturdy-looking tree stump, he'd set off to find someone who could tell him where he was . . . and where he should be going.

* * *

He panted as he laboured up the rise. There was no sun, but the air was filled with a clinging heat that seemed intent on persecuting him.

All around him grew black-petalled flowers. Although he'd never seen anything quite like them before, he felt sure they were a member of the poppy family.

He stopped for a moment, hands leaning on his knees. Once he got to the top of this rise he'd be able to see what lay ahead. A town, he hoped. His thirst was growing with every step, and he was so tired.

He looked down at the flowers. They weren't even nodding their heads. As there was not even a faint breath of wind, the only thing to disturb them was him. They were all around him, stretching to the horizon on all sides. Maybe this was their only home, this hollow in which he found himself.

Their petals were a lustrous black that he didn't think was possible in plants. He imagined that somehow he was the first to discover them. And maybe he'd be given the honour of naming them. *Papaver noctis* sounded right. The night poppy.

He pushed himself back up straight and forced his legs to take him onwards. As he was approaching the top of the rise, he saw several spires of a huge building rising before him. The building was unlike any architectural style he'd ever seen, the spires so unnaturally tall that they disappeared into the light grey clouds above.

As he got to the top of the rise he came across a huge, dark plain as far as the eye could see. Covered in black poppies.

In the centre stood an enormous cathedral or abbey. Even though the cloudbase was low, the spires must still be many miles high. *Impossibly* high.

Whatever its architectural peculiarities, it was the only building in sight. And the only place where he might find help.

He'd been walking for just a few minutes when he saw someone else crossing the plain. They must have been over half a mile away and coming from the opposite direction, but it heartened him to see another person.

There was a kind of heat haze over the flowers, and he had to stand very still and concentrate to see what the figure was. Squinting and

straining his eyes, he could make out the shape of a young woman. She evidently had more energy than he, as she was hurrying towards the huge structure. Then she stumbled and disappeared into the mass of black blooms.

He stood still, watching for nearly a minute, but she didn't get up. Maybe she'd collapsed from exhaustion and was unable to get to her feet again. Even if he'd wanted to help, even if he had the strength, he'd lose his bearings in this black wilderness as soon as he began to move. He'd never find her.

He decided the best thing to do was reach the building and report the woman's accident to whoever was in charge. Meanwhile, he continued to scan the plain of poppies, in the hope that she'd reappear.

The giant building still seemed miles away, even though he'd been walking for over thirty minutes. He stopped for a second and looked around him. The ocean of black petals barely moved, as if they were all part of some enormous piece of sculpture instead of living plants. To reassure himself, he bent and plucked a single poppy, grinding its petals between his fingers. Thin, black juice was smeared on his fingertips.

Wiping his fingers on his trousers, he resumed his trek. As he went on, he felt sure the poppies were growing darker. A colour darker than black? He knew it was impossible, but—

He peered down and realised it was the space between the stalks that was darkening, not the flowers themselves. Its colour was completely opaque, impenetrable. At first he thought the darkness was rising from the earth. It was only when he looked at his hand that he realised it was falling like rain from the grey sky. Two or three black marks appeared on the back of his left hand, to roll slowly and sluggishly off.

He rubbed the back of his hand with his fingers. The "rain" had a peculiar silky feel to it. And it was certainly not a liquid. Nor was it a dust. Or a gas. He searched his fuddled mind for a description but came up blank. He stooped and dipped his fingers into the layer that had settled on the ground. It clung to his fingers for a fraction of a second before sliding off.

The heads of the poppies were only barely above the level of the black stuff now. Suddenly he realised that, if it kept raining, he'd be unable to see

where he was walking within an hour. He daredn't risk that. If he stumbled over or into something—or simply into the “fog” . . .

He hadn't been scared of the dark since he was a child, but he didn't relish being swallowed by it, blinded in the blackness. He began to pump his legs in panic. He had to get to that building, no matter what appalling things he might find there. It was his only possible haven.

Maybe the black stuff was fallout from some nearby industry, he thought. Pollution might also explain why the clouds hung so low in the sky. He didn't want to take the chance that it was toxic; he tried to push himself harder to reach the huge dark building, pulling his jacket over his head as he went.

As the building gradually drew closer, its strangeness impressed itself upon him. Although its design suggested a religious use, aside from the enormous spires there were very few attributes of the sort he was used to in a place of worship. There were no windows visible, which was almost unheard of in such a huge building. And there was an uncanny smoothness about it: an old building was usually covered in statuary or decoration of some sort, often depicting religious figures . . . but not this one.

Finally he felt he was within a reasonable distance of the building. Panting heavily, he crossed the final few hundred feet to reach its vast bulk. He stretched out one arm, symbolically splaying his fingers against the icy stonework. This soon turned into genuine support as he leaned against the wall to regain his breath. One beneficial aspect of the strange architecture meant that he could shelter under an overhang, safe from the dark rain for a while.

The architecture had seemed unusual, even odd, from a distance. But close up it had a disturbing aspect to it. Arches seemed to flow one into the other, while buttresses tried to loop inside one another, as if someone had plucked the designs from the nightmares of some half-insane architect and rendered them solid.

In fact, from a certain angle the whole building seemed to be lurching forward, as if getting ready to break loose of its foundations and hurl itself headlong across the flower-filled plain.

He'd seen lots of old buildings over the past decades— usually at his wife's insistence—and their surfaces wore their age openly. They were weathered, pitted, scarred. Yet the curious black stone of this structure

looked as if it had been quarried only yesterday. But surely nobody built on such a grand scale any longer?

He had no idea the architecture in this part of the world was so distinctive. He didn't remember any of the guidebooks mentioning it. He fished in his jacket for the pocket guide that had been so helpful in the past weeks. It was gone.

Slipping off his jacket, he checked all the pockets twice. Then he looked about him, as if it would be possible to spot the book if it had fallen out on his walk here—as if the black flowers would relinquish *any* prize. He realised that he must look like some over-enthusiastic mime artist to any spectator. Self-consciously he glanced about him; there was no one.

Standing in this strange place, he suddenly felt cut off from his own world. The guide had been his link to home, in a sense. Without it and surrounded by these odd blooms, he felt truly like a stranger. Lost and friendless.

He decided the only thing to do was to find a door into the huge building. There might be a tour guide or a caretaker who could tell him exactly where he was . . . if he could make himself understood to them, of course. He imagined English was a rarity in this district.

His missing guidebook had also contained a selection of useful phrases, but he didn't trust his memory to recall them correctly. He might even accidentally conjure up an insult by mispronouncing something. Glumly, he realised he'd probably have to fall back on his previously unrehearsed skill for mime once more.

Pulling his jacket over his head again, he began to make his way round to the front of the building. When he'd started his journey towards the building he'd hoped to head straight for the entrance, but the bizarre design had defeated him. However, after several minutes of following the curves and angles of the wall, he found himself at his destination.

The front of the building had an enormous doorway set within an oddly angled porch. The overhang was more than enough to provide him with shelter. He walked up the four broad steps leading to it.

In the archway he noticed a detail that filled him with admiration for the craftsmen who created it. The top half of a human cranium had been carved into the curious black stone, to act as a macabre doorstop. A memento mori also, he guessed. Indeed, the top of the skull had delicate

cracks lining it, as if the heavy door had begun to fracture it, like a spoon when it first hits a fragile eggshell at breakfast time. He half chuckled to himself at the playfulness of its creator.

The thought of breakfast made him aware that he was hungry. Once more his hand plunged into his pocket, retrieving the remnants of a chocolate bar. He pushed the last few pieces into his mouth, turning his head to gaze out across the dark field that surrounded him.

The field had disappeared. In place of the black blooms that had stretched from horizon to horizon, there now stood a broad dark lake. It had drowned everything except the architectural monstrosity on which he was standing. He had become trapped on an island.

Exhaling a huge sigh, he sat down on the broad step. His only hope was to wait for the water to subside. The rain had now stopped so with luck the lake of black fluid would drain away. If it behaved as water did, of course.

He might as well make the best of things and play the tourist while he waited for the lake to subside.

To one side was an arched entranceway cut into one of the bizarrely angled buttresses. It led to a wide platform set into the wall of the enormous structure. Cautiously, he peered around the corner of the archway. There was no sign of anyone and nothing that looked dangerous, so he stepped through the opening.

Just a few steps past the archway stood a pair of unusual objects. Set into the floor were two enormous curved shapes, rising to a height of about seven feet. As he walked around them it became clear they were two immense horns, facing each other. He doubted whether they could ever make any sound, as they were made of the same cold, black material as the building itself. They were obviously a piece of sculpture, though what they were meant to represent eluded him.

Between the two fake instruments was a narrow raised platform. It sat in the ten-foot wide space between the bowls of the horns. Worryingly, there were two large metal rings set into the platform. There appeared to be some dried liquid on it. He walked past the rings, not wanting to think of their possible use.

Clustered just beyond the horns was a set of figures, dark and still and slightly forbidding. Some were nearly full-length. Others had been formed

as if they were cut off at the knees. Still others were simply a head and part of a flailing arm.

At first he thought they were sunken statues, impossibly mired in the black stone. He couldn't think how stone could be softened enough to allow such large sculptures to sink down into it like rocks in mud. Yet, instinctively, he knew they had not been carved. He backed away from them in fear when he finally realised that they were the remains of those who had come here before him and stayed too long.

He moved away from them, his arms tucked into his sides, as if they were contagious or unclean. While backing up he bumped into another archway. Looking around, he saw it led to yet another platform. This area contained something that couldn't possibly be human. The giant dark hand was three times the height of even the tallest man.

Only when he stood to one side and looked at a particular angle could he see that, carved into the tip of each great finger, was a face. The expression on each of them was twisted in anger or agony, maybe both.

It was as the wind suddenly picked up that he discovered its true purpose. As the breeze changed direction, each malformed mouth began to moan. He clapped his hands over his ears to block out the hideous sound. The vibration was inhuman. It shuddered through his body, causing pains to rise in his stomach and chest as his ribs vibrated in sympathy.

Other sounds seem to join in, as if the foul voices were accompanied by some monstrous instrument that scratched at his brain like tin and old pain. It was the coldest music ever created; each impossible note held one crisp-edged corner of the night, ready to fold it over him, smotheringly, trapping his breath in his lungs, never to move again.

He twisted from side to side, adding his own voice to the unearthly cantata of despair. His feet started to work seemingly on their own, desperate to get him away from the overwhelming din.

He stumbled past the two enormous horns he had seen earlier. To his horror, they had both burst into life, emitting gargantuan notes that shook the stone beneath his feet. The impossible instruments had been given horrific voice. Anything caught between them would be pulverised with sound, dead within minutes.

He fell to his knees, pushing the material of his sleeves into his ears to afford some relief. The vibration still shivered painfully through his body.

And now he saw that the sound was indeed a summons. From across the lake he saw a procession of figures approaching. At first he thought it must be a mirage brought about by the mind-jarring noise, because the figures seemed to walk on the surface of black fluid itself, in a parody of the divine. But when they refused to fade away, he understood this mock miracle was actually happening in front of his eyes.

As they came closer he sensed that they were walking along a raised path that led across the plain. This was his chance. As soon as it was safe he intended to take that same path away from here.

The procession drew closer with each second. They were not moving at a respectful, stately pace but seemed to be rushing to worship, as if answering an urgent summons.

Their unnaturally long legs moved swiftly like branches tormented by a high wind. Their garments drank in light, as if made of the black rain, cowed around faces of fog and shadow.

Behind them, dragged along as if on invisible chains of air, were a small herd of human vermin, their clothes tattered and filthy, their faces shoddy masks that could not hide their despoiled souls. They were the very lowest apostles of depravity. He was sure he recognised some of the faces.

Fearing discovery, he slid back behind the archway cut into the smooth, cold stone.

From where he now stood, the swelling threnody of bleakness threatened to overwhelm him. He pressed his head against the cold stone, seeking relief. If he were to smash his head open against the unyielding wall, maybe the torment would stop. That was the answer: if he could just dash it hard enough to split it open, maybe the obscene music would spill out of him, every last drop, leaving him in blessed silence at last.

When the figures were within a few feet of the enormous doors, the deafening cacophony stopped suddenly. He dared to breathe a sigh of relief, though he did not hear it. His ears rang abominably, as if someone standing next to him was singing in a preternaturally high voice.

From his hiding place he dared to crane his neck, catching a glimpse of a red-lit interior. He had the unmistakable impression that the procession was descending and moving to the left. He was puzzled why a building that stretched up so high would also need to descend into the ground.

The last of the figures passed out of sight. Once the procession was inside, the gigantic doors closed with an overwhelming crash that he felt more than heard.

He unblocked his ears and massaged his temples. Then he yawned to try and return his ears to something close to normality. Within less than half a minute his ears were more or less back to normal. But then he almost wished that he'd lost his hearing.

From inside the building came an awful sound. It reminded him of enormous hooks scraping against stone. From time to time it sounded as if they caught, digging into the hard surface and dislodging material, which tumbled down noisily.

The unsettling sound continued for a short while, punctuated by the sound of words chanted in an unnatural rhythm. Then both gradually and mercifully faded.

He was certain he heard the sound of hands pounding against the enormous door. There followed a sudden babel of voices. Only one cut through the rest; it trailed off in despair after shouting, "There is no outside!"

This was followed a few seconds later by the sound of the voices receding quickly into the depths of the enormous building. In the sudden silence, he heard the wind pick up, whispering its message of despair to him.

There was only a few seconds of this respite before a single voice could be heard from within the cathedral.

It was lost somewhere between a chant of praise and a cry of terrible agony. It phased alarmingly, becoming something not quite human just before the chilling noise stopped altogether. His mind reeled at what might have happened to the owner of that voice.

Then a chorus of others joined in, adding their pain and their devotion to the lone acolyte's song. Whether in support or condemnation, he preferred not to know.

Within the catechism of despair he'd recognised peculiar names. The last time he'd heard them was in the mouth of one of his daughter's boyfriends. He'd assumed in his arrogance that they were fictional bogeymen, conjured up to scare and delight impressionable children. But in the mouths of these devotees, among words tinged with both devotion and

terror, the names had a cold, awful power—one devoid of any human idea of mercy.

The names themselves became unnaturally amplified, rising in volume until they became a huge column of sound. Once more he clapped his hands over his ears and ran to the edge of the lowest step. It was as far as he could go to get away from the sound.

Eventually the liturgy died down and he lowered his hands in relief. He felt as if his mind had been turned to fog by the onslaught. One thought fought its way to the forefront, and then he remembered the earthen causeway used by the sinister procession.

He ran to the edge of the broad steps and peered down, seeking his path to freedom.

Moments before, it had begun to rain once more. The blackness started to rise almost at once. He stared at the raised pathway as the blackness began to spill over it. He tried to muster his courage, standing with his feet half hanging over the edge of the lowest step. All it would take would be to extend one leg and step onto the path. It was only a foot or so below him.

He had no evidence that the black fluid was dangerous. But his sense of revulsion at touching it sounded like a bell in his head, drowning out any rational thoughts.

Breathing heavily, he tried to force himself to place his foot where he knew the path must be. Then it dawned on him how long the journey across the plain would take. And he had no clear destination. The black flood would have taken him long before anything like salvation appeared to him. He clung desperately to his fears, afraid to let the fluid—if that's what it was—touch his skin.

He suddenly became aware that it was twilight. The light was going and he struggled to fight back a wave of anxiety. The thought of spending the night in this place horrified him. But what choice did he have?

He feared that his presence would be discovered—that the doors would burst open and he would be dragged away to participate in some unimaginable scarlet ceremony. Or that he would be condemned to join the frozen figures, petrified in place forever while his soul screamed in agony, immortal and trapped within.

Night was here now, black as raven feathers embedded in tar. Small dark waves lapped against the stonework at his feet as if against a shore of

utter desolation, an island of pariah souls.

Something was being borne along gently by the rise and fall of the bizarre inland sea. A flash of whiteness would rise above the surface for a few seconds before being obscured again. He bobbed his head from side to side, trying to identify the object. As it drifted closer to where he stood, an awful realisation dawned.

It was the body of a woman, her eyes white against the overwhelming blackness of the fluid. He couldn't be sure because he hadn't been close enough to see her face, but he suspected this was the corpse of the young woman he'd seen running through the poppies earlier. Her face rose towards him on the soft swell of the waters, and he could see that something had used her as food.

He looked away, clamping his eyelids tight shut. When he opened them again, the waves had carried their grisly cargo off into the blackness, offering her up to the night's mercy.

That was the fate that awaited him if he tried to brave the unnatural lake. He felt grateful that he hadn't sought an escape across the causeway into the uncertain night. His thoughts were interrupted by a sound, and he turned his head to follow it.

From far above him he heard sounds of movement. He raised his head to peer upwards, but even the light from the faint stars failed to help him penetrate the darkness. The sounds continued, but he could see nothing. His imagination painted pictures of enormous night birds with penetrating vision, many times better than his own. They might do him harm or even kill him.

Clutched suddenly by a shiver of fear, he retreated along the side of the cathedral, pressed close to the wall. Taking care not to touch the half-buried petrified figures, he slid down the wall behind them and pulled his knees up to his chest.

After many minutes he was seized by a kind of sleep. Inside his unquiet slumber, he dreamt that something came to him, easing its huge body almost gracefully between the immovable figures. It touched him, leaving an invisible stain on his flesh.

He jerked awake, fearful and cold. Instinctively, his hand went up to his face at the place where the dream creature had touched it. He could feel nothing, though the spot tingled and stung. Pulling his jacket even tighter

about him, he forced himself to believe his imagination had got the better of him.

If such a creature did exist, if it had come to him in the darkness, surely he wouldn't still be alive, he reasoned. Unless it was saving the pleasure of his death for later, of course.

He had to get away from here before he became a part of the building or a victim of something unknown. Before he was unable to leave.

He already felt that this non-place, leaking through a rent seam in reality, had sucked him almost dry. It was nearly too late to escape.

For all of one second, he contemplated plunging into the blackness and "swimming" for it, if that was the right word. Even the awful fate that awaited him there was better than the uncertainty that was torturing him.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose suddenly as the scent of blood reached him on the night wind. He could never mistake that smell. It reminded him of hunting trips with his father. The scent had overwhelmed him as the animals died, surrendering their lives too quickly. The smell had made his stomach turn over and it threatened to do the same now. He covered his nose and mouth with his arm and moved back from the edge of the steps.

He wondered who or what had been killed. Had they been killed by the creature he was sure he'd heard earlier? The fear that he might be next froze him in place. He stood, pressed against the vast doors, for an unguessable span of time.

The coldness of his own death touched him, making him feel small and old. He didn't want to die here, alone in this ugly place, far from those who loved him . . . even if only a little.

He was seized by a sudden wave of anger. He felt mistreated, abused by this place.

This shadow cathedral, this gathering-place of obscenity, must not be allowed to remain standing. Though he could not imagine how much force it would take to demolish this leviathan citadel of night, he knew he had to try and persuade someone—somewhere—that it must be utterly destroyed.

Its very existence seemed to blacken the world. Those who had been taken inside were now surely lost. Though he had no sympathy for their type, he knew that others must be spared the same fate . . . whatever it was.

And whatever dwelt within or around it must be destroyed, too.

Sullenly he sat on the step, the cold seeping into him from the stone, staring out into the nothingness around him.

Gradually he saw a shape appear out of the darkness. He was preparing to retreat through the doorway that led to the place of the petrified figures when he saw it was a boat. Crouching down, peering anxiously, he saw that it was *his* boat, the one that had brought him to this accursed place. A small part of him wanted to sink the damned thing in misplaced vengeance. But it was his only way out of here.

The tiny craft was eddying and turning, frustratingly out of reach. Taunting him with a dream of escape.

For minutes he watched as it slowly came closer but still remained out of reach. Carefully he emptied his jacket pockets of his few possessions, then wound the jacket around his right hand. As the boat looked as though it might drift right past him, tantalisingly out of reach, he lashed out with the jacket. One sleeve caught on part of the outboard motor. He tugged at it, giving the boat enough momentum to drift his way. When the side of the boat hit the step with a clunk, he thought it was one of the most beautiful sounds there could ever have been.

Making sure to keep one hand on the boat, he slipped his jacket back on, scooping up his few bits and pieces and dropping them back in his pocket.

Afraid that the blackness might not hold up the weight of the boat with him in it, that he'd sink into the ebony lake, he gently placed one foot down. Ready to leap back onto the steps at the first sign the boat was sinking, he leant more of his weight on the tiny vessel. It sank only a few inches.

He eased himself into a seating position in the boat. Then, mustering all the strength he could, he pushed against the cold stone of the step.

Looking around in the boat, he realised that his rucksack was gone. All his food and water had been stored inside it. He sighed heavily, consciously fighting off the despair that threatened to overwhelm him. One or two items had obviously fallen out and lay in the bottom of the boat, including his watch.

He'd slipped it into an outside pocket of the rucksack when the strap had broken yesterday. He picked it up. The illuminated dial showed him it

was just gone 9.30. It should have been light hours ago. He shook his head, puzzled.

Sitting up straight to look behind him, he allowed himself to feel some relief as the enormous spires, blacker even than the lightless night that surrounded them, began to recede into the distance as the boat drifted farther away.

This was the first time he'd ever thought that any architecture could be predatory. But the idea fitted this carnivorous dark structure perfectly.

He reached out to start the small outboard motor, then quickly withdrew his hand. Part of the side of the motor was missing. It appeared to have been torn off as if it were simply paper. He imagined that it had been done by whoever, or whatever, had taken his rucksack. The perpetrator obviously possessed enormous strength.

There was nothing left to do but sit and wait to be taken wherever the boat would take him. He looked back in the direction of where upriver might have been. Nothing waited for him back there. He wondered what waited for him up ahead as he drifted into the overwhelming darkness.

He pressed the button on his watch to light it up once more. He was incredulous that the dawn hadn't broken. Only darkness was allowed to reign here, it seemed.

By the weak light, he noticed that the map he'd used to get here had fallen out of his pocket. As he picked it up he noticed there was another fold to it. He carefully unfolded the part that had been tucked inside—perhaps on purpose—and peered at it closely, struggling to see. The prospect of undiscovered territory ahead at least offered hope.

There were the rapids he'd had to struggle through this morning. The fields were marked with tiny blobs representing black flowers. Yet there was no sign of any large building. That the nightmare spires could have escaped the eye of any cartographer, however amateurish, was beyond belief—unless that person had intended it to stay “hidden,” to come as a surprise to those unlucky enough to find themselves there.

Then his heart froze as he saw that the river was swallowed up before it reached the edge of the paper. All drawing and writing ceased, swallowed by an enormous stain of black ink. Whether this was on the original map or was just a product of poor photocopying was impossible to tell in the gloom. But neither possibility could explain how the stain now began to

spread ominously across the map, devouring all the badly drawn details in its path.

But I am already sailing through that darkness, he thought. The map was only now “catching up” to reality, whatever that was. He was unsure whether this place was “real.” His cold, numbed body and his fevered mind were both unsure of what was any longer defined by that word.

Obviously the laws that governed the world he was used to didn’t apply here. What laws did apply would be a dreadful new discovery, he felt sure.

The ancient names he’d heard chanted earlier echoed repeatedly around his head, making it feel like an empty eggshell, waiting to be crushed. In his gut he knew that any answers he might seek were hidden within the dreadful syllables of those names. If he had the courage to seek them . . .

As he looked at himself with new eyes, the thought of ever returning to his old life sickened him. Yet his cowardly, sick self balked at what lay ahead.

He crouched in the bottom of the boat, covered his head and sobbed.

* * *

Drifting. Days buried under bruised nights. The dark tide too merciful to drown him, too jealous to release him.

Years later, or maybe only hours, a dim shoreline lashed by black rains rises at the farthest reaches of the ebony tide.

Up ahead, a black dawn is breaking. Up ahead, the shadows gather in procession.

The Ballad of Asenath Waite

ADAM BOLIVAR

Adam Bolivar specializes in writing ballads, a traditional poetic form that taps into haunted undercurrents of British folklore to produce spectral effects seldom found in other forms of writing. His collection of weird balladry and Jack tales, The Lay of Old Hex, appeared in 2017 from Hippocampus Press. Adam was born and bred in Boston, Massachusetts, and currently resides in Portland, Oregon with his wife and son.

*Six bullets did I send that day
Into my friend's ripe head;
And though you think me mad I say
That he by then was dead.*

*Well, Edward Derby was his name,
Of Pickman's tainted line;
His verses would put Poe's to shame—
Permit me to opine.*

*We rambled midst old Arkham haunts,
Two brothers, arm-in-arm,
Ignoring all the vulgar taunts
Of boors who lacked in charm.*

*On days when he would call on me,
He knocked upon my door
In quick succession: one-two-three,
A pause and then two more.*

*My friend toward black magic turned
And read abhorrent works
In books a wise man would have burned,
For in them madness lurks.*

*He found a wife at thirty-eight,
With bulging piscine eyes,
But this was not the only trait
About her to despise.*

*His young bride's name was Asenath,
A child to Ephraim Waite,*

Whose chants could churn the ocean's wrath,
Then cause it to abate.

To say I was concerned for him
Would understate my dread,
For it was such a morbid whim
Which drove the two to wed.

His visits after that were rare,
And furtive were his looks;
His eyes took on a glassy stare
From delving into books.

Some three years hence a message came,
A telegram from Maine,
Addressed by Edward to my name;
Its contents most insane.

To Chesuncook I drove that morn,
Where in a gaol was held
My friend, his clothes in tatters torn,
His ravings madly yelled.

"Y^e Black Goat of the Wood—it came . . .
Iä! Shub-Niggurath!
Kamog! Kamog! Old Ephraim's name . . .
The black-winged foul shoggoth!

"My wife controlled my carnal form
A puppet to her strings,
Which led me to that wood where swarm
The most infernal things."

I drove him home while Edward raved,
Then came a sudden change:
Commanding in how he behaved,
His essence now most strange.

He harried me to take the wheel,
Though Edward couldn't drive,
This stranger with a will of steel—
Old Ephraim come alive!

"My lapse in judgment pray absolve,"
He said, most grim his tone.
"For sanity will soon dissolve
When lost in the unknown."

At last I left him at his door;
Profound was my relief,
For I came quickly to abhor
This thaumaturgic thief.

I little heard from Edward then,
Until there came his knock:
Three briskly and then two again;
His call came as a shock.

"She is not Asenath at all,"
He whispered in my ear.
"Old Ephraim has her in his thrall,
That gruesome puppeteer.

"My mind and his he will transfer,
Just as he's done before;
For that is what he did to her,
And has since days of yore."

It had become quite clear to me
That he must leave his wife,
For nothing but catastrophe
Had she brought to his life.

Alas, instead, he was confined
Within a padded cell,

*For lost was Edward Derby's mind,
And Asenath's as well.*

*Inside the hospital a man
Who was not now my friend,
For Ephraim Waite's abysmal plan
Had reached its fiendish end.*

*At Candlemas there came a knock:
Three times and then two more;
I hastened then to turn the lock,
And open up the door.*

*Upon my step a foetid thing,
Enrobed in scarf and coat,
Which shambled like a ghoul to bring
A scrawled handwritten note.*

*Exterminate that devil-spawn,
Oozed up from darkest hells,
For Edward Derby's mind is gone,
And in him Kamog dwells.*

*I fainted at what Edward wrote;
You know the aftermath,
For when they looked inside his coat,
The corpse was Asenath.*

The Visitor

NANCY KILPATRICK

Award-winning author Nancy Kilpatrick has published eighteen novels and more than two hundred short stories, and has edited fifteen anthologies, including Expiration Date and the upcoming nEvermore! Recently, Danse Macabre: Close Encounters with the Reaper and Vampyric Variations have received awards. Recent short work can be found in Searchers After Horror; The Darke Phantastique; Zombie Apocalypse: Endgame!; Blood Sisters: Vampire Stories by Women; The Madness of Cthulhu 2; Innsmouth Nightmares; and Stone Skin Bestiary.



AN JOLTED AWAKE. *Where am I?* BLEARY-EYED, HE turned his head and saw the red digits on the clock radio—1:00 A.M. Something was *very* wrong, he felt it!

Heart thudding, his flesh unpleasantly slick beneath the covers, totally clogged up from the flu or virus or whatever the hell had attacked him the minute he'd arrived on the island of Granada, he lay still, struggling to calm his thundering heartbeat, fighting for control of his breathing, desperate to keep from having an asthma attack.

Little light came through the nearly closed slats of the Venetian blinds, but it was enough to see that both the room and closet doors were closed, the bathroom door was ajar the way he'd left it, that tiny room empty, but he couldn't see the shower, which was behind the door.

Darting glances told him no one was in the room with him—how could there be? The outer door—the only door— was locked. The screened windows were barred from opening more than four inches. He took a deep, calming breath, hearing the rattle of mucus in his chest, blindly reaching for his inhaler on the night table and then remembering he'd left it in the bathroom, and felt disheartened.

The thought had been good. Get away from the stress of work, of life, but really the emotional turmoil of a relationship that had run its course and was now certifiably dead, or so Rob had decreed.

Ian had found a brochure in the coffee room at work listing this island he'd never even thought of visiting, one so far south it could have belonged to Venezuela when France, then Britain took possession of the land until 1974, the year Grenada gained independence—or so the brochure said.

This spontaneous get-away had Ian on a tight budget—as usual, especially since he'd been abandoned two months ago in the expensive apartment. Why had he agreed to put the lease in just *his* name? Well,

because Rob said it made sense and he'd keep the utilities in *his* name, so they'd be equally responsible. Except that the utilities in Rob's name had been canceled and Ian had to set up an account and fork over a deposit when the lights and stove stopped working.

This "resort"—not really a resort, more a little motel with a pool—was located at the southern end of the island, two miles from the airport, far from the famous Grand Anse beach where the well-to-do stayed. Ian's unfashionable digs were a lot cheaper, if a little distressed. But the Caribbean Sea was close enough, a five-minute walk, although he'd only been there yesterday around 9:00 A.M., just after he'd arrived, hoping the sea air and the gentle waves would soothe his hurt soul. But the waves were violent, the sky black with the coming storm, and the wind nearly blew him into the salty water. He decided on a nap after the early flight, hung the Do Not Disturb sign on the outer doorknob, and crawled into bed, asleep in seconds. But he didn't wake until around ten last night, only to discover that he'd come down with the plague. *Perfect!* What could be better?—alone, abandoned, sick, in a strange land and his cell phone didn't seem to be working down here.

He'd never been anywhere by himself before, certainly not outside the U.S., so that alone made him nervous. But he didn't know what else to do. Two months without Rob in his life after three years with him *in* his life allowed a heaviness to descend over Ian like a lead weight pushing against his heart. His job was affected to the point where his boss suggested he take time off, or think about leaving voluntarily, permanently. He couldn't really afford either, since he was now stuck with the apartment rental, but Bonnie and her husband Lou—friends since high school—had insisted he needed to get away, even just for this very short but cheap weekend. Fly out Friday night, arrive Saturday morning, fly home Sunday night—that seemed reasonable to Ian. It would have been the right thing to do if he hadn't gotten so sick. Maybe he could spend the weekend sleeping—

The white blades of the ceiling fan directly above the bed caught his attention. They sliced the air like knives, a soft whir. Other than that, the utter lack of sound was so unlike life in Cambridge that he found the silence disconcerting.

And then he heard another noise. A small noise. In the room!

“Okay, calm down!” he ordered himself for the twentieth time, this time aloud, wheezing. “You’ve had a dream, that’s all.” More like a nightmare, one he couldn’t remember and likely didn’t want to remember. He was in a strange bed, in a strange country where it was too hot, away from the familiar—which was the whole point of coming here. “Of course you’re nervous,” he reassured himself, sucking in air to a too-familiar rattle in his chest. “Who wouldn’t be?”

Rob wouldn’t be, that’s who! Nothing upset Rob. He was a rock, logical, stable emotionally, all the things Ian was not. And Ian had relied on that rock to hold him up, at least he used to; now he had to rely on himself, and that was hard. Almost impossible. He’d always been “high-strung,” his mom said, and despite all the effort in the world, controlling his emotions was a 24/7 fight, a battle he’d lost over the last couple of months.

He was a wreck, and he knew it. His world had collapsed and he couldn’t cope. And now he was in a strange place, alone, and it just made everything worse! *One more day*, he thought, *then I get on a plane for home*—and immediately he began worrying about terrorism on the flight, or mechanical failure that would drop the 747 into the ocean where he would drown and be consumed by fish. His wheezing increased.

In the darkness he reached for his almost useless cell phone on the bedside table and checked the time: 1:11 A.M. *Right!* he thought, *the spooky time*, and then he reached for a tissue from the box to try to unclog his sinuses and, after pulling one up, knocked the box to the floor.

Finally, with a weary sigh, he pushed the thin blanket and top sheet off his hot, sweaty body, instantly feeling cooler. It was hellishly humid here, even in the middle of the night. He wondered how anything could stand living this far south—and this was winter!

The air from the fan was a relief at first, but Ian realized that it probably wasn’t a great idea to get too cool, so he pulled the covers up to his neck.

He was just thinking about picking up the box of Kleenex when he heard the sound again. A kind of soft crackle, as if paper was being crumpled.

Immediately his heart began thumping. With a groan, he swung his feet to the floor and turned on the lamp, squeezing his eyes shut at the blast of incandescent light. He held his woozy head in his hands for a second until

the room stopped spinning. Then, under the safety of the soft illumination, Ian scanned the room. Nothing and silence, just the fan. The sound was probably from outside the window directly across from the bed. He felt like an idiot. Stupid. A wuss. The way he always felt about himself, but now, add to it that physically he felt like shit.

Ian heaved a bigger sigh of exhaustion, the rattle from his bronchial tubes depressing, and sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. He had to pee. And retrieve the inhaler. He bent and picked up the Kleenex box and placed it back on the table.

Maybe that's why he'd woken up. He was sick. He needed to be upright, as always when he got bronchitis or flu or a cold or whatever caused his bronchial tubes to swell so he couldn't easily inhale or exhale air.

The room, now infused with light, looked the same as when he'd gone to bed. The red eye of the TV, the other red eye of the smoke detector in the ceiling, the multi-red eyes and slashes of the clock radio, the alarm set by the last resident of this room, apparently. His suitcase sat on the floor where he'd left it after a quick unpack of a cooler outfit before flight fatigue overwhelmed him and he'd decided to wait and stash the case in the closet in the morning. His passport and the keys to his apartment sat on the narrow counter that held a microwave and some plane snacks they had passed out instead of a meal—a mini bag of veggie chips, a packet of roasted cashews, and a second Coke he'd gotten gratis from the flight attendant who felt sorry for him, but then he decided not to drink it.

Ian shoved himself off the bed with a groan and stood on wobbly legs. Now he felt chilled. He stumbled to the bathroom as quickly as he could, peed, flushed, didn't bother with soap, just a quick water rinse of his fingers, grabbed the inhaler off the windowsill—he was shaking now from the chills and had to get back to bed!

He switched off the bathroom light; then, on second thought, switched it back on as a memory from childhood of demons in the darkness flitted through his consciousness. If he closed the door partially there would be just a line of light along the bedroom floor but not enough to disturb his sleep—at least he hoped that would be so.

He grabbed the Coke on his way back to bed, then perched on the edge of the bed, pulling the top sheet and thin blanket he'd found in the closet earlier around his shoulders like a feeble old man. He'd better use the

inhaler first before he had the Coke—or should he have a drink before the Ventolin raced through his system and got his hands shaking and his heart racing at 120 bpm? *Keep hydrated*, came to mind, something his mom would have said. And then he remembered Ventolin dried out his mouth and throat too, so he pulled the tab on the can and took a good swallow. The harsh, sweet cola tasted great, so he guessed he needed it, and he downed half the liquid before he placed the can on the bedside table.

Silence. Chills. He needed sleep.

Suddenly that sound again, paper softly crackling. This time he identified it—over by the window, under the window, between the trash can and his suitcase, which were about two feet apart in this small room. *Maybe it's a rat!* he thought, suddenly terrified. He should go look. But he was afraid. He glanced around the room quickly, searching for a weapon, seeing nothing. Then he remembered a broom in the closet of this efficiency room.

He placed the inhaler on the table as quietly as he could, stood naked on trembling legs, paused—silence—then tiptoed the five steps to the closet and took hold of the narrow door's knob. *What if there's someone, or someTHING in there?*

"You're so paranoid," Rob had always accused. "You're afraid of your shadow." He heard Rob's voice as if he were in this room and had just said that.

But Rob had been right. Ian *was* afraid of just about everything. Anything could go wrong at any time. But with Rob's encouragement, he had started to let go of some of his instinctive fears, and then—boom! Rob had gotten tired of him. No, Rob had met someone else! Ian's biggest fear, one Rob had always reassured him would never happen. Until he *stopped* reassuring him and Ian sensed something was very wrong, and . . .

"Get a grip!" Rob's voice again, a snarl this time, and Ian knew he was hallucinating. Chilly now, he trembled, his exhale a suffocating gurgle of not getting enough air in or out that assured him he would never really get a grip.

He turned the knob and pulled open the narrow door. The bedside light showed him that inside was only an iron and ironing board, an empty shelf where the blanket had been, hangers on the pole, one holding a bag of

liquid he had been told would absorb moisture so his clothes wouldn't get mildewy. Finally, a broom and dustpan.

Ian quickly snatched up the broom, unsnapped the dustpan from the handle, and placed it on the shelf, then suddenly turned by instinct toward the small trash can near his suitcase under the window, near the foot of the bed. And was astonished to watch an enormous round bug—it had to be two or three inches across—crawl over the rim of the can, down the side to the floor, and move forward half a foot and stop. Ian thought it seemed to be looking at him as if sensing danger.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't kill bugs, even though he thought them disgusting, and this huge one particularly so. He caught them and put them outdoors in nature—an action Rob had always mocked him for. A quick look at the microwave shelf told him there was nothing he could use to catch this giant, shelled insect that was now exercising its wings as if it could fly. Maybe he could sweep it toward the door and out. Yes, that's what he would do! He leaned back from the closet to the room door that led to the courtyard and twisted a little so he could open the lock. In that moment, he heard a distinct "No!"

His head snapped back. The insect was running in circles. And that scared Ian so much his wheezing intensified.

On impulse, he stepped toward the bug—it really was big!— and tried to catch it with the broom and thought he had. He began one quick and deliberate sweep toward the open door, but when he swept out the door, nothing went onto the outside landing.

"What . . . ?" And then he saw the bug racing up the broom handle. He let out a small shriek as he cast the broom away from him.

Before the broom hit the wall, the bug unfurled its wings and leapt off the handle in midair—yes, it could fly! It landed in pretty much the same spot as where it had started—between the trash can and Ian's suitcase—then raced under the bed.

Now it was Ian's turn to yell "No!"

He grabbed up the broom, bent over, and began sweeping under the bed, the bristles sideways so that they would pull everything out into the open. Nothing, just dust bunnies. Panicked, he did it again and again.

As he was about to give up, wondering how he would be able to sleep with this giant flying cockroach under his bed, the broom brought out the

bug!

Ian tried to sweep it toward the door again, but it disentangled itself from the bristles. Before Ian could react, it ran the other way, moving faster than any insect he'd ever encountered, behind the trash can, up the wall of the little counter toward the snacks and the microwave, then right-angled and disappeared into a crack where the counter met the wall.

"No!" Ian said again, not quite so loud, not wanting to wake other guests who would see him in this naked, "hysterical" state, as Rob would have defined it. And Ian did feel like a madman.

He closed the room door, picked up the broom, and leaned it against the wall in preparation for further battle; then, feeling like the loser in a tournament, he sat on the bed, shoulders slumped, head in hands, body no longer chilly but now blazing, so hot that sweat seemed to gush from his pores. Everything looked strange, as if this place were not a physical environment but a dream world, and he wondered if he was dreaming or awake. Or dead. The wheezing from his chest assured him he was neither dead nor dreaming. He was gasping for air like a fish pulled from the water.

He picked up the salbutamol inhaler, did a test squirt to make sure the medication would come out, and exhaled a big, ragged breath; then, with the opening of the inhaler in his mouth, he pressed the little canister down into the top end of the inhaler's elbow-shaped pipe to take in the medicine, sucking relief deep into his lungs. He repeated this twice more. He felt the Ventolin doing its job, relaxing the small muscles in the walls of the airways, allowing breath to flow in and out without the wheeze. Within minutes the clenched muscles relaxed completely, the obstructed bronchial tubes had unblocked, and he could breathe like a normal person again.

The enormous swell of heat subsided and with it the intense sweating. But now he was getting cold again, so he wrapped himself in the top sheet and blanket and took a sip of Coke, which no longer tasted wondrous.

Ian was used to the side effects of the asthma drug but had never gotten comfortable with the jackhammer heart, the quaking body, the headache that was not always present but when it was, it was a doozie. There was a list of other possible symptoms, some of which he suffered occasionally. But one symptom was psychosis. But he wasn't psychotic—or at least he *hoped* he wasn't.

He'd already started to tremble uncontrollably and was aware of his heart beating so fast and hard that it set his body to quivering even more. This was much worse than usual after using the inhaler, and worse than the flu symptoms, but maybe they'd mixed together. As always, he'd just have to wait it out. Hadn't his mother always said—

"Keep calm. This will pass."

Ian jolted. Rob's voice again! *Who said that?* He looked around the room. Now that he could breathe he not only felt more confidence, but had the liberty of once again thinking about the giant bug and what to do.

As if on cue, the bug tentatively came through the crack in the wall in three stages of movement, then stopped and perched on the edge of the counter, antennae waving frantically in the air. It didn't make a move toward or away from Ian.

"Don't overreact!" it said, and Ian knew that the bug had said this, in Rob's voice, and this was quickly followed by, "You're not losing your mind. I'm your spirit animal."

Unable to stop himself, Ian blurted out, "You're not a bear or a wolf or a raven or an eagle. How can you be my spirit animal? You're just a bug! A cockroach!"

"Palmetto."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I'm a Palmetto. You know, from the palm trees."

Ian's heart still raced, but the speed-like drug made his head much clearer, and he felt brave for once. "Why are you talking in Rob's voice?"

"I'm not. You're hearing his voice, like a translation from Palmetto to English."

Ian grabbed his head just as the headache began to form. "This is crazy. I'm crazy! I'm losing my mind!"

"You're just emotional. You've got to calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Ian's hand shook as he reached for the can of Coke, so jittery he knocked it over, the remaining contents spilling onto the tile floor. "Now look what you made me do!"

"Ian, take it easy. You really are stressing yourself for nothing. It's just liquid. It will dry. If you want, I'll come over there and drink some of it if that will help."

Ian grabbed his head as it began to throb in earnest. "Go away. Please! Just . . . go away. I'm having an aneurysm!"

"Such a drama queen! You're *not* having an aneurysm. It's just a headache from the meds." Something Rob would have said. And still in his voice.

"I'm losing my mind! I'm about to have a stroke! I'm talking to a roach!"

"Palmetto."

"God, stop!"

The creature was silent. Ian spent the next few minutes trying to control his quaking body and pounding heart, breathing deeply and slowing, struggling to relax his brain muscles so the headache would dim. And had enough success that he could contemplate mopping up the Coke.

Finally he stood and walked to the bathroom, scowling at the bug en route, who seemed to be following his movements if the shifting antennae were any indication. Washcloth in hand, he went back to the cola spill and mopped up as much as he could, having to rinse out the washcloth and repeat. Finally he left the washcloth in the bathroom sink, came back to the bed, and re-wrapped himself in the shroud of sheet and blanket to counteract the flu chills that had now replaced the asthma-treatment trembling.

"Ian, I think you should sleep now. You'll feel better with some sleep." Rob's voice again. But Ian also decided that sleep was the best solution to everything—the flu, the asthma, the Ventolin, the hallucination of a giant insect talking in Rob's voice. All of it would dim and hopefully disappear with sleep. He lay back and closed his eyes, leaving the night table light on. He wanted to cry. Instead, he fell asleep.

* * *

Ian awoke to the sound of laughter and chatter. The sounds came from outside his window, and he remembered the pool was in that direction, so it must be guests using the pool. He heard one man say something about dinner on a ship docked on the east side of the island and two women with British accents agreeing that it sounded like a brilliant idea.

He sat up, feeling dizzy, and still sick. Once his head cleared a little, he got his feet to the floor and noticed it was sticky. Right, the spilled Coke. The broom stood against the wall. It all came rushing back to him.

“Talking to a bug. I’m really losing it now.”

He’d missed breakfast and, if the clock was right, lunch too, but he wasn’t hungry. He staggered to the microwave and retrieved the bag of veggie chips, pulled it open, and ate a few, then a few more while listening to the laughter and chatter outside from normal vacationers. Then he noticed the bag was empty but for crumbs, so he tossed it into the trash can, opened the foil packet of smoked almonds, and ate a few, and then put the packet back on the counter. He walked to the bathroom, peed, washed his hands, took a long drink from the tap, filled a glass with water for the night table, hoping foreign germs did not worsen his condition, and turned off the bathroom light.

Despite all the sleep, and the sheets damp and unpleasant from sweating for hours, he climbed back into bed. The rattle in his chest was mild and he decided not to use the inhaler until absolutely necessary. He’d try to sleep more and hope that the rest would cure him. *It might not help but it can’t hurt*, his mom always said. He switched off the night table light and sighed as his head hit the pillow.

* * *

When he woke again it was dark out. The lights in the room and the bathroom were off, and he only heard the soft whir above him, so it took a moment to remember where he was.

“Are you awake yet?” came Rob’s voice, and Ian tensed and held his breath. He sat up abruptly, waited out the ensuing vertigo now accompanied by nausea, then with a shaky hand reached over and switched on the lamp.

There it was, where it had been the night before, between the trash can and his suitcase, seemingly staring at him, antennae waving in his direction. Ian didn’t even bother with formally being shocked or repulsed by the creature or the voice. He just got right to it. “What do you want?”

“You need help.”

That made Ian laugh bitterly. “You want to help me, huh? By driving me crazy? I’m a sick man, or hadn’t you noticed?”

“I noticed. It will pass.”

“Oh, you’re a doctor too, not just a roach.”

“Palmetto. And no, I’m not a doctor, but my species has existed since the beginning of time and we’re aware of many things, like vibrations. You’re not at death’s door.”

“Thanks for the encouraging words.” Ian knew he sounded petulant and didn’t care. If he was psychotic, so be it. There were drugs for that and he’d get some when he got home . . . when . . . tonight! Yes! Relief flooded him. He checked the clock—four hours until the flight. He’d be out of here soon.

“So why are you talking to me? What’s this about, Mr. Palmetto?”

“You can leave off the ‘Mr.’ I’m female.”

Ian raised an eyebrow. “Too much information.”

“Not enough, really.”

“So why? What do you want?”

“You need an intervention.”

Ian laughed.

“Ian, I know you’re suffering. But I can help. I carry the wisdom of the ages. Of the universe.”

Ian snorted. “Right. With Rob’s voice.”

“I told you—it’s a translation issue. His voice is one you recognize and you give it authority.”

“Not anymore!”

“Are you sure about that?”

Ian took a sip of water. This insect had his number. Maybe he was nuts, hearing Rob’s voice, talking to this lowest of the low creatures, but hey, he was still pretty sick and had nothing much else to do before the flight, so he might as well converse with a roach. Palmetto.

“Okay, so how are you going to help me?”

“I’ll give you the key to unlocking your potential.”

“Oh, so you’re running a motivational workshop. How much?”

“Your path involves destiny. Expediting the greater good.”

“What greater good?”

“Facilitating others in need. You will help the weak become strong.”

“Yeah, right!”

“Don’t be so cynical.” Rob’s voice and Rob’s exact words, and Ian sighed.

“All right, what should I do to become this powerhouse of transformation?”

“Well, first of all, you need to go home and cure yourself of this physical illness.”

“Thanks, I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“More cynicism! Next, you’ve got yourself in a mess financially. Sublet your apartment and rent a smaller and cheaper one.”

Ian had, of course, thought of that, but the energy required seemed beyond what he was capable of.

As if reading his mind, the Palmetto said, “You’ve got to do it, even if you think you don’t have the energy. It will save you money and save your sanity by not going back to that place every night that evokes memories and sadness.”

The Palmetto gave Ian a moment to think that over, then said, “And you’ve got to get back into your job. This is not the time to change jobs. Stick it out. Your boss likes you or he would have fired your ass months ago.”

Ian signed again. “True. I’ve been a slacker.”

“Exactly. You have to pull yourself up. It’s over with Rob, he treated you badly, but shit happens and you’ve got to move on. Start with those three things and you will find yourself in a much better place.”

Ian felt chilly and pulled the covers around his shoulders. “You’re right. I have to do all those things. I feel so alone. I just wish I had someone to help me.”

“You do. You have me. I can help you recharge your life. And the best part is, when you’re solid again, I can help you get revenge.”

Ian didn’t like the sound of this. “What do you mean?”

“You can get back at Rob and anyone else who has ever hurt you. And don’t tell me you don’t want to. I can see your deeper desires.”

Ian was about to protest but realized that made no sense. He’d thought about revenge a lot—on Rob, and on others—so this wasn’t out of nowhere. “But how?”

“Oh, there’s a plan already in motion. And there will be help refining it. Don’t worry, it’s all sorted out. It’s what we do. We befriend the weak and helpless and they become strong and powerful beings.”

“Well, I’m not sure I want to know your plan. But how can that work anyway? I go home in a few hours. And you’re here.”

“Oh, I’m going with you!”

“What? No! Not happening. First of all, you’d infest my apartment. Second, you couldn’t survive the cold climate. Third, what do you mean by ‘with you’?”

“Infest your apartment? Really, Ian? One Palmetto? And my species can tolerate extremes. Besides, your place is heated, isn’t it?”

“I guess, but—”

“And when I say ‘with you,’ I mean I’ll be there as your advisor and confidante, helping you make the right decisions and taking action for the betterment of all species on this planet.”

Ian thought about this for a few seconds, listening as the whir of the fan in the room cut the air. He was hot now, pushing the covers off, sweating profusely. And his thoughts had become muddy again. Was Rob’s voice going to be with him forever? He had enough clarity to say, “So what are you getting out of this, Ms. Palmetto?”

“Everything. I’ll see new places and observe different human beings, expanding my knowledge base of your species. After all, you humans are fascinating, your strengths and weaknesses, your insecurities; we’ve been studying you for a very long time.”

“Why study us? We’re not that interesting.”

“Oh, but you are! You seem hell-bent on extinction, and my species has known we can help your species with that problem because we are survivors, if you’d only accept us in your world. My offer stands. Yes, or no?”

Ian’s body dripped sweat. He stared at his moist palms and thought about all that was said, or tried to, but his brain wasn’t functioning. He just knew one thing: he had to pack and get to that plane. When in doubt, decide nothing—that had always been his motto. Finally he said, “Thanks for the offer, but I can do this on my own.”

He looked up, but the Palmetto had disappeared from its spot between the trash can and his suitcase. Maybe the hallucinating was over. “Are you there?”

Nothing. That *had* to be a good sign.

He pulled himself to his feet, lurched to the carry-on, with effort lifted it onto the bed, and then opened it. A smear of brown covering his clothes suddenly started moving, undulating, like hundreds of Palmetto bugs, and he jumped back with a cry. Ian blinked; they were gone. Just his clean jeans and T-shirt and socks, so he took them out and dressed, then tossed into the suitcase everything on the night table and the opened foil packet of smoked almonds from the counter and his toiletries from the bathroom, the clothes he'd worn on the trip down, the inhaler, and then snapped the case closed. As he slipped on his runners, he grabbed his jacket from the back of the door and the room key in one hand, the carry-on in the other. He'd get to the tiny airport early and have something to eat there, then another hit from the inhaler—fewer symptoms on a full stomach. He'd be home by morning. All this would be behind him. No more flu. No more Rob-the-talking-roach. *Palmetto!* And he laughed so loud at that thought that he didn't hear the foil crackling inside his suitcase.

The Gaunt

TOM LYNCH

Tom is thrilled to be in the table of contents of Black Wings 6, having been a fan of the lauded series since it was first announced. His fiction appears in a number of magazines, including three different issues of the Lovecraft eZine, and numerous anthologies including Golden Goblin Press's Heroes of Red Hook and Children of Gla'aki: A Tribute to Ramsey Campbell's Great Old One from Dark Regions Press.



RTHUR BISHOP STEPPED DOWN OFF THE COACH AND waited to one side while the luggage was taken down from the roof. He had not been back in just over seven years, and he could see the changes. He could smell the river from where he stood, but he could no longer see it. When he'd left, it had been visible from where he now stood, but new shipbuilders' and fisheries had been built, with more under construction, blocking it from view.

With an audible thud, his trunk was deposited at his feet, and the mud from the road splattered his trousers. The coachman stood there with his hand out, clearly waiting to be rewarded for soiling Bishop's clothing. Bishop made a show of looking for some coinage to bestow, but shrugged at the portly ruffian and reached down to take up his case. The coachman spat some expletive and stomped back through the mud to the waiting coach. Bishop lifted one end of the wooden box and turned away.

Gone were the days when he would use his own horse and carriage for this task. As it was, he was reduced to straining his slight frame against the considerable weight of his trunk north along Peabody Avenue toward his house. That slight frame of his had gotten him a nickname in primary school that had stayed with him. People called him "The Gaunt" because he was so terribly thin. He hadn't liked the moniker in the past, but now he felt it suited him as he came back to haunt his old town and stir up painful memories.

The further he got from the center of Arkham, the fewer the changes were. Seven years was plenty of time to make significant updates, he supposed, but other things were never likely to change. The town itself still felt as if it were watching him. He'd heard, of course, of the troubles while he'd been away. The papers had covered how the last witch had been found

and disposed of. He hoped, at least, that *she* had been guilty, since so many others were not. So many others. Two, in particular.

Despite himself, his vision blurred with tears. He coughed, cleared his throat, and strained to pull his trunk toward his old home. He wiped at his face with his worn wool coat sleeve and walked on. It was just as well that there was no one on the streets to see or recognize him. There was a chill in the air, and he scowled as an early snowflake landed on his cheek. Some would revel in the colors of the New England foliage, but Bishop was back for a reason, and only for a short time, so the scenery was merely a distraction for him. The drop in temperature, however, was sure to be a stumbling block to his comfort. His house had been empty while he was away, and he was certain that making it livable would be a challenge.

Bishop tugged on his chest and trudged through the gray day. In more time than it should have taken, he arrived. He leaned his case against the stone wall surrounding his property and examined his house. It looked to be sagging under the weight of years of neglect. Windows stared out at him from behind the shaggy brows of overgrown trees, and the closed doorway frowned at his extended absence.

He reached out to the iron gate and pulled at the lock. After some struggling, it groaned and gave way. He gave it a push, and the entire assembly promptly fell off its hinges with a death squeal and landed in the wet, waist-high grass beyond. Bishop gazed down at rust-eaten metal as it lay there, and hoped the inside of the house was not as dilapidated.

Bishop stepped back through the gateway to fetch his trunk and hauled it up to the front door. Pulling out his keys, he set to work on getting into his house. Happily, the lock did not stick. The door, however, did. Bishop was not a large man by any stretch, so it took him rather a while to force the door open. But succeed he did, and eventually, with a sore and swollen shoulder, he stood inside the house he had fled seven years before.

Overcome with a flood of images, Bishop stumbled into a nearby dust-caked chair and sat as his mind's eye was filled with memories: his wife Charity holding baby Faith as he came home from a day at court, young Faith running to greet him as he came in, the two of them sitting and reading by the fire in the parlor. Arthur Bishop wept. Again. He cried long and hard, his body shaking. He howled until his throat was sore. This was

why he could not have stayed. This was why he'd left. This is why he hadn't come back.

Until now.

His body quivered where he lay on the floor. He didn't remember falling. The sobbing eventually retreated, however. Cold seeped in. It was the cold from outside. Drafts found their way through the neglected walls of the house and drove Bishop to rise.

He remembered that his wife, Charity, acting as her name indicated, had made extract-of-willow tea for the town's first selectman's maid, who had been complaining of head pain. The maid's recovery was seen as proof of witchcraft, and Bishop was allowed to live because he'd been told he was under their spell.

He knew.

He knew where the real evil was.

It had taken some time, and some work, and many sacrifices. Weeping sadness and desolation had turned to cold, hard fury, and now it was time for him to take his revenge. Revenge for taking life. Innocent life. Lives. The lives of his beautiful, wonderful, witty wife, and his charming young woman of a daughter. The Gaunt would exact that vengeance.

He did not know how many others had been innocent, but he presumed that most of them had been. Once hysteria had taken hold, no one was safe. And of all things, helping a prominent figure's servant proved a family's undoing.

Another tear slid down his cheek. Not the last. Of that he was quite sure.

He rose, walked over to his trunk, and dragged it upstairs. The furniture in the house still seemed to be intact and usable, and for that he was grateful. He rested the box next to his desk and turned around, searching for something to use for a fire. Seven years of standing in the elements would have done his wood pile no good. He'd need something he could burn.

He clenched his jaw. Burn. They would all burn. Burn for those they murdered in the name of what was "right and good." Based purely on irrational fear, those self-serving bastards had killed his family, and for that they would burn. And Bishop would help them on their way. He shook his

head free of such thoughts. That would not help his fireplace. For that, he needed something more mundane and immediate.

He went downstairs, and outside to the cellar door. He hoped not everything down there would be completely rotted through. He thought he had stacked some wood downstairs to keep dry, and was rewarded to find the woodpile still there. Clearly field mice had lived there for a time, but they too had moved on.

Thinking about it, Bishop marveled at the state of his home: left alone for seven years, and just a few cracked windows and warped doors. Only weeks after the “authorities” had executed (murdered) his family, he had left. He had packed his necessities, told the neighbors he was leaving, and then done just that. Rumors and fear must have kept the children and thieving hooligans away. Anticipated retribution from a witch’s ghost would keep most at bay, he supposed. He smiled. The townspeople’s simpering superstition was good for something.

Yes, their hysteria is what helped him to form his plan. He had told people he simply had to get away, to start afresh, and perhaps return one day in the future. But he’d known from the outset why it was he was leaving. He was leaving to plot a way to exact vengeance. Even then, in this midst of his wracking grief, he knew that the small-minded residents of this backwater would pay for hurting him, but he did not know how. He was no warrior or soldier. He was a lawyer and scholar, so he needed something from past wisdom.

And he’d found it. In his lengthy travels around the colonies and back to Europe, he had found just what it was he needed. It wasn’t any one answer, and it wasn’t from any one book. It was from several different sources, including some writings that were quite old indeed. The prize among the collection he had acquired was a Latin text from Spain printed earlier in the century, which had allegedly been translated from eighth-century Arabic. They were loath to part with it, but Bishop’s offer of substantially more money than the book was worth earned him his reward. That transaction, however, had all but paupered him. Acquisition of that ultimate piece left him with just enough funds to travel back to Arkham, via a ship to the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s capital of Boston.

Time had conspired against him, now and again, by distancing him from the memory of his loss. Whenever he realized this was happening, he

would pluck at the wound. He would remember their cries as they were pulled from his grasp. He would remember their tears. He would remember the screams of agony as the local people of Arkham burned his wife and daughter alive at the behest of the board of selectmen.

Bishop clenched his jaw and hefted his armload of logs back upstairs, and lit himself a fire. He also lit some candles from his trunk in an attempt to stave off the impending gloom. He then set about unpacking the rest of his belongings. There was precious little, but then he didn't plan on spending much time here. Bishop had packed supplies, almost exclusively. True, he'd packed some oatmeal, and some blankets in case those that he'd left behind were too moth-eaten. They were, of course, and it was cold, so he was glad he'd brought what he had.

Finally he was set to begin. On his desk were his books, several clean sheets of paper, a few quills, some jars of ink, and fresh candles. He'd set his blankets on the bed in the corner. He was using the third bedroom—a room he'd used in the past as a study. He simply could not bring himself to stay in either his old bedroom, which he'd shared with Charity, or his daughter Faith's room. He found himself alternating between weeping and raging when in these two rooms. No, he needed to focus his energy as much as he could and this room suited his needs. It also gave him a view of the road and the walk up to his house, so if anyone happened to drop by, he had a chance at seeing them from here as they arrived.

The wind picked up as the sky darkened. Leaves flew across the window as Bishop glanced outside and remembered again. Faith had always looked forward to winter. Frolicking in the snow had filled Faith with joy all her short life. Bishop knit his eyebrows and smiled a sad smile. She'd always loved making snowmen with her mother. She would decorate the snowmen with leaves she'd pressed in the autumn only months before.

He sighed and sat down. He dipped his quill and started copying the first pattern from one of his books. This was going to take some time. The Gaunt set to work.

* * *

Bishop was rattled out of sleep by a pounding at his door. It took a moment, and two more rounds of door-knocking, for him to wake and remember where he was. He'd worked well into the night on his preparations, and the neat stack of papers on his desk was a testament to that.

Sudden fear poured in. If it were the town officials downstairs, then he would need to hide all this from view, because they would be the same intellectual insects who thought tea was evidence of witchcraft. He hurriedly stuffed everything into the drawers of the desk and pulled the top closed. He straightened his clothing and went downstairs to greet the insistent visitors.

With some difficulty, Bishop pulled open the door and squinted into the morning light to see the first selectman, ready to knock yet again. Bile surged to the back of his throat, but Bishop smiled through it. "Ah," he said, splitting his face with a grin he did not feel. "It's good to see you again, Dalton. I'd wondered when you'd drop by."

Jeremiah Dalton stood staring at Bishop, his mouth agape. "I—" he started.

"Come now, old friend. I'm sure you can do better than that."

"You've returned!" Dalton eventually managed.

"Very good! Yes, I have. Your concern is most touching." Bishop winked and peered around Dalton. "That's not young Peter is it? And how is Mary?"

"I, uh . . ." Dalton started again. "Yes! It is. My son. Peter. Mary is well, thank you."

"And you're still first selectman, are you not?"

"I am," Dalton replied, puffing up. The insufferable lout was so terribly self-important that it made Bishop's soul dance to think that Dalton would soon reap the rewards of his sentence on Bishop's innocent family.

"Then, my friend, Arkham is still in good hands. I only arrived last night and have yet to resupply anything, or I would invite you in. As it stands, I have a good deal of cleaning and fixing to do."

"So. You're back, then?"

"Really, Dalton, I thought we'd covered that. Yes, I am back. I have returned. I am resuming my life in Arkham. Is that quite all right?"

"Oh. Of course! I just—"

“Indeed. Now, if you’ll excuse me, you must have better things to do than get your shoes wet in my overgrown garden, and I need to get back to my chores inside. I’m certain we’ll see each other again soon.” Bishop turned and walked back into his house, closing the door on the politician. He always marveled at small men given small amounts of power. Clearly incapable, they always made a hash of things. Naturally, the townspeople were too feeble-minded to do anything about it, and had left the dullard in charge.

The Gaunt shook his head and flashed a toothy grin back at the door. It would all change soon enough.

* * *

The concluding preparations were underway. Extensive, strenuous hours of work were behind him, and the space itself was ready. The attic had been emptied, swept, and cleaned. He had marked due north on the wall with some charcoal. There was barely enough room for even Bishop to stand straight, but he wouldn’t be standing for terribly long, and it would all be over soon anyway.

Tired, he glanced down at his hands, covered in bruises, the knuckles scraped bare. There had been a bad moment during the cleaning out of the attic. He had found a doll of Faith’s. It had been hers when she’d been small. So small. So blameless. So sweet. He’d howled his anguish then and beaten the wooden floor with his fists until the pain he’d inflicted upon himself had quieted his tortured memories. A cold filled him when he’d finally calmed. A terrible calm determination.

He climbed back down the ladder to the second floor of his house and gathered the supplies from his traveling case. He plucked the ceremonial dagger, cup, and candle holders, all of which he’d had specially made for this event, from their nesting place, and carried them up the ladder with reverence.

One more ingredient was needed, and it was now time for The Gaunt to enter the last stages of his plan. He dressed and set out to Dalton’s house to ask a favor.

Irony of ironies, the same maid cured by Charity's tea opened the door to the town leader's house. She gasped and almost fainted at the sight of Bishop, but happily he had prepared himself. His heart still lurched in his chest at seeing her reaction and knowing all that she was likely to be thinking, but he managed to remain outwardly calm.

She showed him in to the parlor, where he sat and regarded the opulence around him, complete with glass cabinet filled with the latest porcelains from the Far East. This family wanted for little, so Bishop found it odd that they could be so ethically wanting. He regarded the crucifix on the wall and twisted his lip. Surely they had missed the mark completely reading the Bible and acting as they did.

"Mr. Bishop," Peter's adolescent voice came from the doorway, "I do apologize, but my parents are not in."

Bishop had to struggle to contain his glee. It would be even easier this way. "Frankly, son, it was you I needed, if you don't mind."

"Oh?" Peter smiled, standing taller. "How may I be of help to you, sir?" He stepped into the room. The young man was on the very cusp of manhood—tall, but not yet broad. Brown eyes remained soft and clear in his open expression, and his smooth face was only just turning angular with the onset of maturity. Peter adjusted his waistcoat and did his best to look casually elegant, only partly succeeding.

"As you know, I've just moved back into my house," Bishop said. "And as you can imagine, there is much work to be done. Well, I've found that my cellar is in dire need of clearing out, and I simply cannot lift most of the crates blocking my way. With your strong back to aid me, we could make quick work of it, if you're willing."

Peter bowed and smiled again. "I would be happy to, sir. I'll just fetch my coat and tell Margaret where I'm bound."

"Please assure her that she can tell your parents you'll be done in time for dinner."

Mere minutes later, the two were climbing down the steps to the cellar of Bishop's house. At the bottom, Peter paused. He was only a boy. Perhaps fourteen. There was a moment of guilt, but then that was the age Faith had been when Peter's father set oil-soaked logs at her feet. Bishop remembered Dalton crying that he would not be seen by St. Peter as weak, like those in

Salem who refused to burn their witches and took the easy road by hanging them.

Peter knit his eyebrows and started to ask Bishop a question, seeing the wicked blade in his host's hand. The young man looked down at the dagger and up at Bishop's face. And Bishop's stomach quailed. Could he truly do this? Could he shed the blood of an innocent? Would that not debase him and sacrifice his own soul? Bishop's hand shook, his conscience making war with his quest for revenge. He started to lower his hand, when again the image of his beautiful wife and child screaming in panicked agony flashed before his eyes. The Gaunt stepped forward with his ceremonial dagger and buried it to the hilt in young Peter's abdomen.

There was surprisingly little blood as Peter's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Finding strength in his mission, Bishop pushed Peter back and wrenched downward with the blade, slicing a gaping wound in the boy's belly. That's when the blood began to appear. He'd prepared for this earlier, though, by placing a bucket and several ceremonial carved bowls of obsidian close to hand on the cellar stairs.

With a gurgle, Peter stumbled backwards and coughed out his last breath. Bishop stared down at the dagger and his hand. Both were covered in gore. He'd been worried that killing the boy would unnerve him, or, worse, that he wouldn't be able to do it. He was pleased with himself: he had found the strength to do what he'd set out to do.

Only the final steps were before him now: he affixed Peter's body to the pulley system he'd attached to the ceiling and hauled him into the air by his ankles.

* * *

The sun had just dropped below the horizon, and there was a smell of cooking meat in the attic air. The smell wafted from the candles he'd just made from the fat he'd extracted from Peter's body. The boy had fulfilled his purpose. His blood decorated the attic floor in a copy of the intricate pattern from the book he'd acquired in Spain, and his skull sat in front of Bishop, upside down and filled with his own blood, to be both sipped and offered at the appropriate times. The instructions had been quite particular.

Bishop felt he was now truly “The Gaunt” as he stood naked, covered in patterns painted on his skin in Peter’s blood, chanting an ancient language, walking a pattern prescribed by a forgotten Arab. He was certain that he looked quite like a savage, and indeed he supposed he was—vengeance incarnate. As he went through the steps he’d memorized, the room suddenly felt chill and the candles dimmed. The culmination was approaching.

He sat in the center of the symbol he’d drawn on the ground and kept chanting, pulling the dagger through his own flesh now, spilling his blood into the boy’s hollowed skull, when voices cried from without. He was only vaguely aware of them, and he refused to allow them to distract him, even though they hammered on the door below with great ferocity.

Finally he felt the connection. He had reached through the Void Between and made contact. It felt as though he had opened a doorway inside his mind and some Great Being had made an offer of acquaintance. The Presence that he felt, however, made him shudder. His mind pulled back from the chasm of enormity that it faced. Sweat poured off his body; he felt himself weakening.

Then he saw Charity’s face. He saw Faith. He saw them reaching for him as he was held back and they were being taken away. He saw their tears, the terror in their eyes. He knew there would be no trial. This was to be a burning. He heard his little girl cry “Papa!” as the flames rose around her.

With that, iron poured into his will, and his focus was the keenest razor. He raised his mind’s eye before the presence on the Other Side and offered up the board of selectmen, every one: all the self-proclaimed leaders of Arkham. All the petty, puny people who would rather lash out at the unfamiliar than stop to understand aid when it was offered. He prostrated himself and offered their souls on a gilded platter for the Being’s consumption.

Lightning flashed. Thunder and wind clashed outside. A gale began to howl just as they burst through the door downstairs.

But they were too late.

Arthur Bishop smiled: The Gaunt’s revenge was upon them. It was upon them all.

He felt the Being stir and take interest. He felt acceptance. He felt a fist close around his soul and lightning surge through his veins.

“Bishop!” cried Dalton from the parlor, standing with the bailiff and his deputy.

And Bishop, The Gaunt, stood before them, still naked and bleeding, still coated in ancient runes painted in young Peter Dalton’s blood. The runes glowed, pulsing with the fury of the storm.

Dalton saw him and started. His two toughs froze. The Gaunt saw the first selectman’s bravado waver. “Good God, man, clothe yourself!”

“You come face to face with your doom, and all you can think of is your puritanical aversion to nakedness? Surely I *am* serving the greater good.”

Dalton huffed a weak objection.

The Gaunt continued. “What of your son? Do you not wish to ask after him?”

“My . . . son?”

“Truly you are an idiot, Dalton. Goodbye.”

“What are you—?” and his voice caught in his throat with a gurgle. His eyes bulged as The Gaunt’s gaze bored into his. Dalton drew his head back, trying to turn away but finding himself unable to do so. His face shook with exertion, his bountiful jowls quivering like holiday jelly, and still The Gaunt glared at him. “*NnooOOO!*”

The Gaunt stepped forward and reached into Dalton’s mind, finding a man whose whole ambition was to see himself on the throne, at the top of the heap. It was an image so easy to manipulate. Dalton’s heap festered with rot. The stomach-turning sweet smell of decay filled his fantasy. The selectman whimpered. The Gaunt then introduced Dalton’s family to the image; and there, while suddenly bound to a chair atop a pile of offal, The Gaunt defiled Dalton’s wife to her great pleasure while Dalton’s son watched, aroused. Upon completion of the act, The Gaunt snapped the woman’s neck and tore out young Peter Dalton’s throat. Dalton sat on his moldering throne and wept.

Back in the physical world, The Gaunt stepped swiftly forward and tore out each of Dalton’s eyes, blinding him to the outside world and dooming him to see nothing but the ruin of his own fantasy.

Dalton’s lackeys, suddenly free from the paralysis of fear and confusion, launched forward at their master’s screams— and dropped bonelessly at

The Gaunt's feet as he melted their minds with the power granted him by the Presence now within him.

The Gaunt grabbed Dalton by the back of his collar and kicked the backs of his knees, such that the portly mass of pomp dropped to the floor. The Gaunt grabbed Dalton's thinning hair and pulled his head back. Dalton yelled in pain, and this suited The Gaunt perfectly. He reached into Dalton's mouth and snatched out the man's tongue.

Dalton's cries grew shrill and choked as the pitch climbed and the blood flowed down his throat.

The Gaunt dragged the useless sack of humanity out of his house and into the pouring rain outside. He dropped the refuse in the mud on the road, to be collected by any who cared, or not.

Finally, he reached across into Dalton's mind and bridged the gap to the Being. Bishop had promised burning and fire, and The Gaunt granted it. Dalton's mind *burned*.

Lightning blazed across the night sky, capturing the image of the naked Gaunt, still glowing with bloody sigils, still wielding power from Beyond.

He had promised the Being *all* the selectmen, and as they had taken his family, so he would take theirs. Only then would The Gaunt's vengeance be complete.

Missing at the Morgue

DONALD TYSON

Donald Tyson was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His first nonfiction book, The New Magus (expanded as New Millennium Magic), revolutionized the way practitioners of Western magic look at this ancient art. He has annotated and edited such classic texts as the Three Books of Occult Philosophy by Cornelius Agrippa, the Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy, and the Demonology of King James I. His horror stories have appeared in numerous anthologies. The Lovecraft Coven, a novel about H. P. Lovecraft (Hippocampus Press), and a collection of ten short stories about Abdul Alhazred, author of the Necronomicon, titled Tales of Alhazred (Dark Renaissance Books), are both currently available.

1



ONE OF MY SOURCES AT THE SEVENTEENTH PRECINCT gave me a hot tip that the body of serial killer James Aught was being held for autopsy in the morgue at St. James Hospital.

After he had strangled five young women and terrorized the city for twelve weeks, the police had finally cornered Aught in an abandoned tenement and killed him in an hour-long shootout that had been televised nationwide. However, no photograph of Aught had been released to the public. All the media had was a hypothetical police pencil sketch, done days ago based on the memory of a woman Aught had tried but failed to strangle to death.

I jumped into my car with my camera and smoked rubber getting over to the hospital before any other freelancer got wind of it. When I say smoked rubber, I'm speaking figuratively. My Smart Car doesn't have enough horsepower to do any serious tire burning. But it is a wiz at snaking through crosstown traffic. I felt like the Purple Avenger, slipping in and out of traffic slots too small for any ordinary car or truck even to think about trying.

It was nine-thirty, still during evening visiting hours at the hospital. The public lot was full, but I managed to slide my car into a half-space at the end of the row, under an enormous aluminum lighting standard.

I was feeling pretty good about myself as I made my way through the hospital to the service elevator that led to the basement. The feeling ended when I stepped out of the elevator car and saw Detective Sergeant Leroy Biggs standing in the hall beside the door to the morgue. The expression on his face when he recognized me said he was experiencing the same regret.

"How the fuck did you find out about this, Dalhoy?"

"You know how it is. I keep my ear to the ground."

"Did Mickelson on the front desk tip you?"

Damn, Biggs, you're good, I thought, but shook my head with a solemn expression.

"You know I can't let you in," he told me, folding his massive arms on his chest. He cut an intimidating figure at six-foot-two and around two-eighty.

"Don't you find it degrading, being assigned to guard a room full of dead people? It's not like Aught's going to wake up and strangle them."

"I'm not here about James Aught."

My ears pricked up like a retriever's when it hears a shotgun. "What are you doing here, Biggs?"

"I can't tell you that, Dalhoy."

"Come on, you know I can keep my mouth shut. What's going on?"

He sighed with exasperation and chewed his bottom lip. He was hurting for want of his usual cigar.

"It's weird shit," he grumbled. "I might have known you'd show up. You always seem to be around when something weird goes down."

"What can I tell you, Biggs? It's karma."

"The head pathologist, Doctor Yeu, called to report the theft of organs from the corpses stored in the morgue."

"Somebody's stealing organs to sell for transplants?"

Biggs shook his head. "The bodies aren't fresh enough for transplants."

"A fetishist, then," I said, beginning to get interested.

"It looks that way, unless Doctor Frankenstein is building another monster."

The door opened behind Biggs and two police forensic techs came out carrying their gear.

"A uniform is being assigned to this door, Dalhoy," Biggs told me as I watched the techs make their way toward the elevator. "No unauthorized personnel get in or out."

"Just ten minutes. I go in, I snap a pic of Aught's ugly dead face, and I'm out. Ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," Biggs repeated.

"Tops."

He shook his head with disgust as he frowned down at me. I'm only five-foot-seven, so he had a long way to look.

"Get in, get your picture, and get out. Don't make me regret it."

I slipped past him into the morgue and shivered. It was cold in there. The stench of formaldehyde was strong in the air and left my nose dry and stinging. A Chinese woman in a white lab coat was bent over a stainless steel table that held the naked corpse of a man. She had short black hair and black-framed eyeglasses with thick lenses.

"Doctor Yeu?"

She turned to me. The lenses of her glasses made her dark eyes appear enormous.

"Is that the body of James Aught?"

"Who are you?" she asked. Her accent was so heavy I had a hard time understanding her.

"Police photographer."

"I thought the police had all the pictures they needed already."

"One of them was bad. I need to retake a photo of the corpse's face."

She stepped back from the table and gestured with her hand. "Be my guest."

The man on the table had been shot through the face just above the corner of his upper lip. Someone had cleaned up the blood, but the hole was gaping and raw. It was a lovely detail. His eyelids were half-open and his glassy grey eyes stared at the ceiling. He was an ugly son of a bitch, but no worse than many others I had photographed over the years.

I moved to the head of the table and held my camera over his head, focusing on the plane of his face. It would put the tip of his nose slightly out of focus, but no matter. The picture I snapped was upside down, but that was easy enough to correct on the computer.

"So I hear somebody's been stealing organs from the stiff," I said in a conversational tone.

The pathologist just looked at me. I'm tempted to say her expression was inscrutable.

"Any suspicions as to who is taking them?"

"That's not my job. You should ask the police—you know, the ones you work for."

So much for charm.

“There’s twenty dollars in it for you if you tell me what you know.”

She glanced toward the door. We were alone with the dead. She extended her tiny hand. I put a twenty in it and the bill disappeared into her pocket.

“It started two weeks ago. First it was a heart. Then a liver. We started to notice and keep track of what was missing.”

“How many people have access?”

She shrugged. “Half a dozen. Myself, my assistant Arthur Kurtz, cleaners, the orderlies who move the bodies.”

“So it must be one of you who stole the organs, right?”

“That’s what the police believe.”

“What do you believe?”

She looked at me seriously. “The organs go missing when the morgue is empty and the door is locked.”

“You mean, there’s nobody in here, the door is locked from the outside, and the organs disappear?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s impossible.”

Her face hardened. “I’m not saying anything more.”

Biggs poked his head through the door. “Your time is up, Dalhoy. Get your ass out here.”

I smiled at the pathologist. “My boss. A real slave-driver.”

“You know what you’ve got in there, Biggs?” I said when I exited to the hallway.

“What have I got?” Biggs asked without curiosity.

“You’ve got a locked-room mystery.”

“There’s no such thing as a locked-room mystery,” he said.

“Don’t you read Agatha Christie?”

“I’ve got too much work to waste my time reading.”

“The head pathologist says the organs go missing when there’s nobody in the morgue and the door is locked.”

“So she’s lying, or she’s mistaken.”

“You don’t sound very intrigued.”

“It’s parts of corpses, Dalhoy. I’ve got murders to solve.”

2



HE AUGHT PHOTO GAVE ME THE BEST PAYDAY I'D had all year. I sold it to the television news, a newspaper syndicate, a wire service, and the tabloids. That's the way it was when you were a freelancer—long droughts were followed by heavy rain. I used the money to pay up my back rent and pay off the remainder owing on my car. It still left me with a nice piece of change in my checking account. I celebrated by buying some groceries.

I might have forgotten about the mystery of the missing organs, but later that afternoon Michelson phoned.

"You remember that morgue where they took Aught's corpse?"

"The morgue at St. James Hospital. What about it?"

"Something's gone missing."

Immediately I thought of the organ thefts. "You mean another organ was stolen?"

"Organ? What? No."

"What are you talking about, then?"

He lowered his voice. "Last night somebody stole Aught's corpse."

"What? You mean they took his whole body?"

"That's what I mean. The department is keeping it quiet while they try to track down its whereabouts. Is that sick or what? Should be right up your alley, Dalhoy."

I broke the connection and sat back on my couch to think. The cushions and back of the couch were covered with strips of silver duct tape. A while ago someone had broken into my apartment and ransacked it, cutting up my couch in the process. One of these weekends I'd have to look around the garage sales for another one.

The organ thief was getting bolder, as he continued to pursue his hobby without getting caught. He or she, I corrected myself. It could be a woman who was doing it. Usually, however, it was a man who indulged in this sort of fetish obsession. I didn't want to know what he was doing with the organs, but I had a nasty suspicion that turned my stomach. He probably liked fava beans and Chianti. But why would he steal an entire corpse? Was

it just coincidence that he had taken the infamous corpse of James Aught, or had it been purposeful?

I've got a number of personal problems myself. Happily, fetishism isn't one of them, and neither is necrophilia. But I've got a heart condition that will probably kill me one of these days, when I overstrain myself. And I've been told by a psychologist that I've got a mild form of autism spectrum disorder—what they used to call Asperger's Syndrome. I'm also compulsive, in that I can't resist the urge to solve a mystery when it falls into my lap. I knew I had to investigate the theft of Aught's corpse, even if there was no payday in it for me. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I didn't do it.

I drove over to St. James and made my way down to the morgue. Biggs and his crew were already there. He looked about ready to tear his hair out. Not being able to smoke his stogies while in the hospital was really getting to him.

"Not you again," he said when he saw me at the open morgue door. "Are you haunting me, Dalhoy?"

"Just trying to take the picture that will get me in *Time* magazine, Biggs."

I sauntered into the morgue, and he didn't throw me out. At one side, a policewoman was interviewing Dr. Yeu and a nervous white man in a crewcut whom I took to be her assistant, Arthur Kurtz.

"I thought you were going to post a man outside the morgue door."

"He was there all night."

"So how did the thief get Aught's corpse past him?"

"I don't know."

"He must have left the door at some time, to go to the toilet."

Biggs shook his head. "He's a rookie. Young guy, strong bladder. He swears he never left the door."

"He fell asleep, then."

"He says he didn't."

"He's not likely to admit it, though, is he?"

"He's a good kid, Dalhoy. I believe him."

"Are you sure the corpse was in the morgue when he got here?"

"He went inside and checked it himself. Aught's body was lying on that table." He pointed to the same stainless steel table where I had photographed Aught's face.

The policewoman was finished with the pathologist and her assistant. I moved away from Biggs so that they could talk, and approached Arthur Kurtz, who had a dazed look. I gave him my name.

"Mind if I talk to you, Dr. Kurtz?"

He blinked and focused on my face. "Are you with the police?"

"I take the pictures," I said, which was completely true.

"What do you want to know?"

"These organs have been going missing for about two weeks, is that right?"

He nodded.

"During that time, have you noticed anything strange?"

"I don't know what you mean." His blue eyes slid away from mine.

"Anything out of the ordinary. Anything funny, odd."

"Not that I'm aware of," he said, but he still wouldn't look at me.

"You saw something, didn't you. What was it?"

He glanced at Dr. Yeu. I wondered if she had told him not to say anything.

"It's all going to come out in the end, Doctor."

Finally he met my eyes. "It was nothing. Just my nerves. I didn't mention it because it was unimportant."

"Tell me what it was. If it really is so trivial, I won't even report it to Detective Sergeant Biggs."

"Sometimes I work late into the night," he said in a low voice. "One night about a week ago, while I was at my desk, going over some paperwork, I heard something out here."

"Where's your desk?"

"In the office." He pointed at a door.

"So what happened?"

"It was a kind of slithering sound—I don't know how else to describe it. I left my desk to investigate. At that hour, the only illumination comes from night lights that are left on all the time, so we don't bump into tables in the dark. Most of the morgue was in shadow. I heard a scratching. I thought it must be a rat."

"Do you get many rats down here?"

"No, we never get rats. I've never even seen a rat, and I've been working here three years."

“So you heard a scratching. What did you do?”

“I went toward it.” He swallowed and looked at me apologetically with a faint smile. “As you can imagine, I was nervous. It came from under one of the sheets that covered a corpse on a table. As I got closer, I could see the sheet rise and fall, as if something was moving around under it.”

“What was the name of the corpse?”

“It was just a John Doe. Some homeless person who had a heart attack.”

“What did you do next?”

“I stood there, trying to work up the courage to lift the sheet. By then I had convinced myself that it must be a rat, but I didn’t want it to jump at my face. Finally, I took hold of the sheet by one corner and just jerked it down and off the table.”

He stopped talking, his blue eyes unfocused. He was looking through me, into the past, reliving the moment.

“As the sheet slid aside, something moved away on the other side of the table.”

“Something? Like what?”

“I didn’t get a good look at it. It was fast and the light was poor. I can tell you that it wasn’t very large, but it was too big to be a rat. It was more the size of a cat or a small dog. But it was black all over. It looked like a moving shadow sliding across the floor.”

“Where did this shadow go?”

He pointed toward the wall of stainless steel drawers that held the bodies. “That direction. It was dark. I ran to the light switch, but by the time I turned on the overhead lights it was gone.”

I thought about this for a few seconds. “Could it have slipped into one of the drawers?”

“I looked in all of them. There was nothing there except the cadavers.”

I thought about what else I should ask. “Was an organ missing from the John Doe?”

He shook his head. “You see why I didn’t want to tell the police about it? The whole thing makes me sound crazy.”

I patted him on the shoulder of his lab coat.

“Don’t sweat it, Doc. I won’t tell them.”

3



AFTER MIDNIGHT I MADE MY WAY INTO THE HOSPITAL through the emergency ward and slipped past the guards when a bunch of car crash victims came in. I made my way down the stairs to the morgue level and just waited in the base of the stairwell. Through the window in the doors I could see the uniform cop Biggs had stationed at the morgue door.

Not many men can go eight hours without a piss break. The rookie may have managed it the first night, but tonight he started to do the pee-pee dance just past three-thirty. Eventually, he left his post and slipped into the bathroom down the hall. That was my cue.

I left the stairwell and went into the morgue. The door was unlocked, probably to allow the uniform to check inside periodically. It was dark in there, but enough light came from the nightlights low on the walls to keep me from bumping into things, just as Arthur Kurtz had said. I knelt by one of them and made sure my camera was ready to shoot. If something was coming into the morgue, I wanted pictures of it. Then I found a clean white sheet and an empty table, climbed up on the table, and draped the sheet over myself so that it covered me from head to toe.

I folded it up on one side so that I could peek under it and see the main portion of the morgue. The table was near a wall, so most of the large room was visible, although the shadows were so thick it was hard to see much more than the shapes of the equipment.

Once I got used to the smell, it was kind of peaceful. I almost fell asleep. A metallic sound snapped me back to alertness. I couldn't visualize what made it, but it sounded like a metal roller of some kind. With great care, I lifted the corner of the sheet to peek under it.

Something moved around the morgue. I saw its shadow, and it was a lot bigger than any cat. It bent over the tables with corpses on them and seemed to sniff the air, as though smelling them. It was making its way across the morgue in my direction.

At this point I lost all desire to get a picture of whatever it was. I lay still as death and tried to quiet my breathing so that my chest wouldn't rise

and fall. I was in the grip of a dread that chilled my entire body to the bone. I couldn't have moved if I had tried.

It came near and bent over my table, and I saw from under the sheet that it was a naked man. His junk was dangling no more than a foot away from my face. The smell was terrible. He had been dead too long and not kept in the freezer.

Abruptly, the sheet was whipped away. In the dim light I saw him lean over me. I acted on instinct and took a flash shot of his face. The camera flash startled him and made him stumble backward. I slid off the other side of the table and headed for the door, but he was too quick. He had his arm around my neck from the back. I used my camera to hit him in the face over my shoulder. It's a heavy piece of equipment. We banged into a table and sent the instruments on it clattering over the tile floor.

I was seeing stars when the overhead lights came on. The arm released my throat and I could breathe again. I turned and saw the naked corpse of James Aught struggling with the rookie cop. They looked as if they were in a dance competition, but I don't know if they were doing the waltz or the jitterbug.

There was something wrong with Aught, besides the fact that he was dead. Something black protruded from his open mouth. It was about the size of a tennis ball and it had glittering black eyes and white teeth. Its teeth snapped at the rookie's face as he tried to hold it at a distance.

I looked around, found a motorized bone saw, and hit Aught in the back of the head with it, over and over. It made a dull crunching sound as it bounced off his skull. Aught didn't even seem to notice the blows. He had his hands around the cop's throat and he was strangling him. Old habits die hard.

When I managed to hit the black thing that hung out of his gaping mouth with the bone saw, I finally got his attention. He released the rookie, who crumpled to a heap on the floor, and came at me. I stumbled backward and hit my head on something hard. I must have passed out for a few seconds.

You know that disorientation you get when you pass out? You don't remember where you are or how much time has passed. I blinked and looked around. I was lying on my back with my head propped up against a set of drawers. Across the morgue I saw Aught. He had the rookie by the

feet and was pulling him into one of the open drawers in the wall that was just above the floor.

Aught moved in a way that was not even human. He seemed boneless. He squirmed and wriggled his body into the drawer, and I watched the body of the cop slowly pulled in after him. Just as the cop's head disappeared, he opened his eyes and looked at me with a stricken expression of pure horror. Then he was gone into the drawer. After a moment, the drawer slowly rolled shut, and I heard the metallic roller noise that I had heard earlier but been unable to identify.

4



SO WHAT WOULD YOU DO? GET THE HELL OUT OF there and call the police, right? Sure, that's what any sane human being would do. Only, I knew how long it would take them to respond. What I didn't know was how long the rookie would continue to be alive.

Getting to my feet, I checked out my camera and headed toward the drawer. I pulled it open with caution, keeping my face well away from the opening, but when I peered inside it was empty. Completely empty. It was like the kind of magic trick David Copperfield might do in Vegas.

My mind really wasn't working clearly. The bang on the back of my skull had fucked up my thinking. Fumbling for my cell phone, I dialed Biggs's private number. He didn't pick up. I tried 911, but was put on hold. Fuck it. I put the phone away and crawled into the drawer.

If I were a bigger man, it would have been too tight a space to move around in, but I'm only five-foot-seven. I was able to get into the drawer and work the drawer shut from the inside. It was pitch black. I dug out my phone and opened it, then used its screen as a flashlight. There was a kind of shadow at the end of the drawer. I wormed my way back there and discovered a section of sheet steel missing from the side.

It had been neatly cut away. When the drawer was open, the back end of the drawer hid the opening from view. It only revealed itself when the drawer was all the way closed, and then only from inside—and who in their right mind crawls into a corpse drawer?

In for a penny, in for a pound, as the Brits say. I squirmed my way through the hole and into the narrow tunnel that lay beyond it. It smelled like death. Not like formaldehyde, but like rotting flesh. There was only one way to go, and no way to turn around. I squirmed and humped my way forward like an inchworm, with my camera in one hand and my glowing phone in the other.

At some point the phone lost its signal. Big surprise, right? At least the battery didn't give out on me. The tunnel came out on an old culvert of some kind that was made of brick. It must have been a drainage culvert for storm water, but it was dust dry and didn't look as if it had been used for a century. It was big enough to stand up in.

I stood looking left and right, wondering which way to go. Then I noticed the drag marks in the dust in the bottom of the channel and followed them. They led me around several turns and into side channels to another hole in the side of the culvert.

"Shit, this is getting old," I muttered to myself.

My head was pounding with the worst headache I'd ever had, and I was seeing double. I knew I should be in the hospital. I crawled into the hole and began to worm my way forward. Mercifully, this tunnel was short. It opened on a vast dark space that smelled and felt wet.

I stood up and went forward cautiously. The glow from my phone only illuminated a small circle around my feet. I was walking on gravel that crunched under my sneakers. After a dozen steps I came to the edge of black water. The phone glow wouldn't show me the far side, so I knew it must be at least twenty or thirty feet across, but the echoes told me it was a lot wider than that. A whole lot wider.

The gravel didn't show which way the rookie had been dragged. I mentally flipped a coin and started to the right. After walking a little way, I found him lying face down near the water. With a sinking feeling, I turned him over.

He was alive. A bruise covered one cheek and he was cut over the eye, but otherwise he did not seem badly injured. His eyes opened wide and he started to struggle.

"Take it easy," I told him. "Me friend, you savvy? I'm going to get you out of here."

He collapsed, all the fight gone out of him. Then he started to sob. I pretended not to notice.

“That thing—what was that thing?” he babbled, staring around at the darkness beyond the glow of my phone.

“I don’t know, but it can’t have gone far. If you can stand up, we need to get the fuck away from here.”

He didn’t argue. I helped him up, and we limped back the way I had come. We hadn’t gone a dozen steps when I heard the sound of water splashing and falling. I pointed my phone at the pool or lake or whatever it was.

“Oh, Jesus,” the rookie said. “Mary, mother of God.”

I didn’t have any words. At the limit of the pale glow, something large rose up from the surface of the black water. It was roughly spherical and black, about ten feet across, and its entire surface wriggled and writhed like a ball of snakes. Black things began to drop off it and splash into the water. They swam toward us with a serpentine motion of their bodies. They were about two feet long and impossible to describe. They looked something like salamanders, or like eels with short arms and legs. They had little round heads with white teeth.

“Shut your eyes tight,” I told the rookie.

I paused to snap off several flash pictures. The flash drove them back for a moment, but then they started coming after us again.

“We need to run,” I said.

We began to limp and hobble along the pebbled beach, as I thought of it. I had a moment of sheer terror when I wondered if I was going the right way back to the hole in the wall, or if I had been turned around when I snapped the pictures of the writhing ball of monsters.

The things started to overtake us. They weren’t strong. If they had been, we’d both be dead. We were able to kick and punch them away from our legs, but their little mouths drew blood each time they touched us.

“Oh, shit,” I said.

We stopped dead. Standing beside the hole was the naked corpse of James Aught. From its gaping mouth, one of the little round heads of the black creatures extended outward, its tiny glittering eyes watching us. They were like the eyes of an insect, soulless and without a trace of compassion.

The concussions of the rookie's Glock almost knocked me over. He stood in a shooting stance with both hands on the grip of his gun, firing at a steady rate. I saw one of the bullets hit the round head of the creature in Aught's mouth. The head exploded and the corpse of Aught collapsed to the gravel at the same instant.

There was no time to congratulate ourselves. The squirming black things were all around us. We kept kicking and hitting them, trying to prevent them from getting a grip on us with their teeth.

"You go first," the rookie said. His face was hard, professional. I guess the training had finally kicked in.

I didn't argue with him. I climbed into the hole and went as quickly as I could. I could hear his Glock firing behind me. Eventually he ran out of bullets. I waited for him in the old dry culvert, but he didn't come out. Finally, I had to get the hell out of there. I ran down the culvert, not paying attention to where I was going. I didn't know where the tunnel to the morgue might be, and anyway, I had no desire to squirm my way into it with those black things behind me.

After following the old drainage system through a dozen twists and turns, I found an iron ladder and climbed to a higher level, where the tunnels were still in use. I found a door and came out in a municipal pumping station.

5



BY THE TIME I GOT BACK TO ST. JAMES, THE MORGUE was a madhouse. Biggs and half a dozen other cops were questioning everybody on the night shift. I guess someone must have heard Aught attack me and the rookie.

"Not you again, Dalhoy," Biggs said in disgust when he saw me. His eyes narrowed. "What happened to you? You're covered with dirt and blood."

"Shut up and listen."

I pulled him aside so that we could talk without being overheard, and told him what had happened. He looked at me as if I had gone crazy.

"It this some kind of joke?"

"The rookie's dead, Biggs. He saved my life."

“Lewiston.”

“Was that his name? He was a good man.”

“Where is he?”

I pointed at the corpse drawer at the bottom right-hand corner.

“Send a man in there. Tell him to have his weapon ready to fire, and make sure he has a flashlight. Close the drawer on him.”

It took a while before I could convince Biggs that it was necessary. He found a policewoman with a slender build and sent her in with her gun drawn and a flashlight in her other hand. After a few minutes, she knocked on the side of the drawer. We pulled it open.

“What did you see?” Biggs asked.

She shook her head. “There’s no opening. Just a brick wall.”

I approached her and took her arm. “Wait, you’re saying there’s no tunnel?”

She shook her head.

“Goddamn you, Dalhoy, I should have known better than to believe your crazy story!” Biggs erupted.

Before he could insult me any further, I lifted my dust-covered camera and recalled the picture I had snapped of Aught’s walking corpse with the black thing sticking out of his mouth. I showed it to Biggs in the viewfinder. That shut him up. I showed him the other picture of the black ball. It didn’t convey much. There was no way to judge its size in the photo, and not much detail was visible on its black surface, but at least it was something to prove that I hadn’t fabricated my story.

Days went by. Biggs investigated the disappearance of Lewiston but found nothing. He even tried to dig out the bricks at the back of the corpse drawer, but after his men dug in six or eight feet, he had to stop. There was no tunnel. Somehow those creatures had filled it in during the time it took me to get to the surface and back to the morgue.

Nobody questioned me again. Nobody tried to seize my photographs for evidence. The whole thing was so insane, the police just quietly let it drop. Can you blame them? Who would want to be responsible for investigating such a story?

You’d think I’d make a fortune selling those pictures, right? Wrong. These days, everyone automatically assumes a pic is phony if it contains anything weird. There are so many ways to fake photographs, most of the

time they are right. Trouble is, the genuine pictures fall through the cracks because nobody takes them seriously.

Lewiston's body was never recovered. I went to his memorial service. I didn't want to go, but I had to do it. At the end of the ceremony I approached his mother to offer my condolences.

"I knew your son briefly, Mrs. Lewiston," I told her, holding her hand. "He was a fine man and a real credit to the police force."

She nodded. Her eyes were red but not wet. She had already cried all the tears she had in her.

"I just pray to Mother Mary that he's at peace. He was a good son."

I nodded and tried to smile, but in my mind I had an image of Lewiston's corpse, lurching through the darkness with a little black head full of teeth sticking out of his gaping mouth.

The Shard

DON WEBB

Don Webb teaches horror writing at UCLA extension. When his twin brothers were excused from the draft for their gout in 1967, they gave him The Colour out of Space and Other Stories. One look at the flaming skull on the cover, and he belonged to Lovecraft ever since.



MY COUSIN BART AND I WERE THE SAME AGE. WE were both smart. He was Ivy League smart and I was University of Texas smart, and we were big SF geeks. James and Bart: big dorks. He was seventeen when IT happened. We never knew what IT was. His parents took him to the UK that summer. Mainly straight-on tourist stuff—Stonehenge, Big Ben, Bath, that sort of thing. My aunt was (and is) a musicologist. She was researching the “Brichester Sound”—an obscure late ’60s phenomenon—overshadowed by the lads from Liverpool. It was a mix of psychedelica and something called “Severn Valley” folk music. Stuff like that bored Bart silly. He was like me a collector of coins, rocks, and weird stuff. So while Mom and Dad were interviewing old hippies, Bart took a handful of pounds and visited Lower Brichester shops. The last one, Mercy Hill Curios (“If you can afford it, it’s a Mercy”), had tons of neat (and, despite the slogan, affordable) junk. He bought a plastic frame that showed Britain’s last traditional currency next to the decimal stuff, a large very worn copper penny with Queen Victoria, a signed copy of Carl Dreadstone’s *The Mummy* (Carl being a Lower Brichesterer made good), and a tourmaline spar about four inches long. On the flight back to Dallas he slept in the plane, holding the green and pink rock crystal in his left hand.

His senior year started and his grades fell like a stone. His parents suspected dope or girls. But Bart just stayed in his room. Frequent searches did not reveal the devil’s cabbage— and other than his growing fascination with *Star Trek* in the form of Spock posters, he seemed to have no vice. I remember visiting him for Thanksgiving. His room was creepy. Every wall had posters of Spock, Saavik, Sarek, T’Pring, and every other Vulcan or Romulan you can name covering all the walls. His books were gone (except *Star Trek* comics). His CDs gone. His rocks gone save for the

aforementioned tourmaline spar. He wore a blue *Star Trek* uniform. He tried to Vulcan nerve-pinch me. His parents had him tested. His 186 IQ had dropped by a hundred points. There were drugs and therapy—and by the end of the year he was out of high school and in a special institution. His parents stopped talking about him.

By 1992 I had my BS in geology from the University of Texas and was doing a master's at Rice University in petroleum geology. My future was so bright, I had to wear shades . . .

I was the only family member who would visit Bart. He still liked sci-fi, and I would take him to current movies. He told me corny jokes:

Q: What did Spock find in Kirk's toilet?

A: The Captain's Log.

or:

Q: How many Vulcans does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Approximately 1.000000000000000000000000000000.

He would joke about being crazy. I noticed he never let the spar leave his hands, even when eating. I reached for it once. He did a Gollum impression: "My precioussssss." But he held on. And life went on. I got my MS, and then got a Mrs., and then divorced and got another Mrs. Then Sally died. I would see Bart once or twice a year. He was a little less talkative. Somehow we both became thirty and then forty. I got a golden retriever. I joined a couple of book clubs—one read classic science fiction, the other touch-to-read stuff like *House of Blue Leaves* or *The Raw Shark Texts*. And Bart held on to his crystal. On his forty-second birthday I showed up to take him to see *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*.

"Don't want to go," he said.

"Why not? You loved the book," I said.

"I see better movies in my head." He showed me the spar as if that explained anything. I hung around for fifteen awkward minutes, while Bart said nothing. I didn't come again. In 2013 he began not speaking at all and was often force-fed. In 2014 he began sleeping almost all the time, became neglectful of basic hygiene, and other than fighting violently if his crystal

was taken away showed no interest in the outside world. In 2015 he passed. His parents sent me a small box containing the crystal shard, a couple of worn-out comic books, and a small diary that bore the word “Glarky” written about a thousand times.

I put it in my garage, where it lay undisturbed until Amanda, my on-again off-again girlfriend, had a garage sale. I gathered old clothes, tons of paperbacks, and odds and ends to sell. I found the box and took a long look at the crystal.

At first it appeared to be zoned tourmaline—the kind sold at gem shows as “watermelon tourmaline”—but it was not a crystal. Its shape suggested a small stalactite. It had been exuded. I looked in my old mineralogical books. There was nothing like this. I scraped off a little and had our lab guys look at it. For the most part, it was boron silicate colored with iron and magnesium. It was also mixed with a plastic that resembled DNA. It had a trace of radium. In short, it was unlike anything we knew about. Apparently it was an artificial extrusion, perhaps the product of some gem-making process, but the weird organic contamination and the radium would have been ridiculously expensive to manufacture. It was smooth and showed dichroism: it looked red if you held one way, green in a different angle.

Now these aren’t details that would interest anyone without a background in mineralogy. But the sheer strangeness of this blend cannot be exaggerated. I spent many hours trying to figure out how it had been made, why it had been made, by whom and so forth. I started carrying it around with me. Then one night I fell asleep holding it. I had a dream—both vivid and boring—of Bart flying from London to Dallas all those years ago. I could taste the diet soda and the stale chicken sandwich he ate; listen to my aunt talk about the bands Titus Groans and Faveolate Colossi. I watched the flight attendant with the dyed red hair and cute butt drink rum and cokes with Uncle Bill. I could feel Bart’s boredom, just as I could feel the ache he got in his legs mid-Atlantic. Despite the uninteresting content of the dream, it was without a doubt the most vivid/realistic dream I had ever had. I assumed that my emotional need for closure had conjured up the dream. OK, Amanda assumed that when I told her about it.

So I repeated the experiment. I slept with the shard in hand every night. I had tons of dreams about Bart. Bart brushing his teeth (with crystal

in hand), Bart masturbating, Bart in high school, Bart doing art therapy at the asylum, Bart eating popcorn with me at a movie, Bart refusing to go see *The Hobbit*. It was amazing and strangely soothing. The dreams, regardless of their content, made me feel good—deeply rested, happy, even blissful. I began to suspect that the shard was a device for recording experience. Maybe it had belonged to a spy, or maybe it was an occult thingamajig.

It led to my first (and last) fight with Amanda. I wanted to hold on to the crystal while we made love. Yeah, that went well . . .

After I had become a dream junkie for a couple of months, my boss told me to take some time off. She also told me to “throw that damn rock away.” Being single, economically cautious, and a good investor, I knew I could do without a job altogether for two or maybe three years. If I could figure out how to make these crystals I would make major bank. At least I told myself that. Mainly I lay around in the yellow pajamas with the gold crown embroidered on them that Amanda had bought me. I stopped watching TV, going on Facebook, even listening to the radio.

The next set of dreams was of a skinny unshaved British man in a Titus Groans T-shirt writing something in a notebook. This guy lived in a little flat in abject poverty. One time I saw him going to buy milk. His flat was on the second floor at the top of Mercy Hill—shopping was a bit of an ordeal—and he seemed to give it up. I had a few dreams of him starving to death, but grinning as though in the throes of inexpressible ecstasy.

Then I started dreaming about Mr. Spock. In my dreams I was Spock. Then I made myself look into a mirror. I wasn’t Spock.

I was a green-skinned humanoid with tufted and retractable ears. I had seven fingers on each hand and something that looked like a vagina between my catlike eyes. I wore no clothes, but sometimes I wore black armor. I had red and green crystal spars growing under my armpits. One of the longer spars I recognized as the one I now owned.

Or perhaps owned me.

In the presence of others of my kind, a thin pink tentacle would come out of the slit on my head. Others depending on social rank had different-colored tentacles. When these waved in the air I knew what the others thought. Those with blue tentacles outranked me, I outranked the other five colors.

We were on a space ship. Actually a small part of a planet that we had built a city on and detached from the main planet. We were hurtling through space, I guess protected by a force field.

I was of an upper class. I had not yet decided what gender (of the four) I should become. We had a mission. It was very important. Our city was beautiful—great black spiraling steeples and angled archways. In the center of the city was a huge transparent crystal trapdoor. Something very bad was underneath it.

Slowly I became the Other.

* * *

I am exuding this memory crystal under universal protocol. It should be directly viewable to Class II (or higher) sentient of organic or artificial nature. I am a Class III engineer responsible for propulsion maintenance. We are transporting the asteroid out of the galaxy. If you are experiencing this record, it will be clear if we were successful. I am taking dream suppressants to keep the Unnamable's Dream Pull from effecting me. I estimate that in thirty years we will have left the galaxy.

Our colony on Saty IV had been in place for fifty years, until the Unnamable was awakened by mining operations. We had encountered such beings before: their hibernation cycles were well known. Because of the value of the minerals on Saty IV, it was decided that we would enclose the Unnamable in a force field and continue mining. A large crystal door was placed over Its burrow and a constant guard placed to observe the Being. It was estimated that our mining operations would be finished in thirty-five years. Afterward we would destroy all organic life on the world so that It could not use dream engineering to create organic servitors. We had underestimated the age, and therefore the strength, of the Being. It may be one of the first of its kind. The symptoms were manifested ten years ago.

Where Class IX sentients are entombed, a disease called "religion" is manifested. As opposed to the self-controlled quest for pleasure and power balanced by the needs of maintaining orderly society that marks all Class III sentients, religion is a compulsion produced in memory creation—

which for most Class I or higher sentients is called “dreaming.” The compulsion is a fixing of certain states of quantum flux on a Class IX. This focusing is expressed through Art, Ritual, Sex, and Death. The attention provides a certain energy for the Class IXer that enables it to mutate into forms capable of extremes of ecstasy and greater personal power. It is obviously an illogical process, although most sentient races pass through the process on the way toward true consciousness. As the IXers do not need a constant source of these energies, they tend to Awaken, Feed, and move on. Some species have been destroyed by this process. We were aware of the risk but in our hubris thought we could avoid the danger—at least long enough to gather what we came here for.

What we later discovered was that this was a Class X. We Class III sentients live in the four dimensions of a ten-dimensional universe; the other six dimensions are closed to us, save for the leakage of gravitons, which causes our four-space to curve. We perceive time as flowing in one direction only and have a major distinction between past, present, and future. We are aware of a fifth dimension, which we perceive as “consciousness” that affects the collapse of probability in the four-space. Class VIII–X sentients live in nine dimensions, with only one closed dimension. They can perceive time flowing (or stationary) in any direction they choose. Likewise, they have three dimensions that act in ways analogous to our “consciousness.” They are aware of the dimension gravity leaks out from and can share dreams with any memory-encoding organism that is within their gravity. Hence time in a galaxy—or possibly even a galactic cluster—is a simultaneous event. Their manifestations in four-space—their bodies—are constantly evolving in reaction to stimuli that we can largely not perceive. Although their bodies can be very large (star size) or very small (molecule), these are not the main part of their being, and are analogous to the sharp nail on our seventh finger: painful if removed, but in no way life-threatening. Since they exist in the nine-space, they appear to us as existing both before and after the current four-space came into being. The Unnamable had other properties we could not test for—and strictly speaking we (as five-dimensional beings) could not *think* of.

It seems that the dreams started about nine years ago. They are exceptionally pleasant, involving sex, cruelty, strange ideation, and sensations that we have not evolved organs to experience. At first the

dreams were seen as a harmless pastime. The dreamers soon began to use hidden means to communicate with one another—hand gestures or the production of certain slightly offensive smells with their scent glands. Painters and weavers began making images of the Unnamable in Its previous bodily forms. It was openly suggested that such artworks might even be an addition to our “way of life.” And besides, in twenty millennia what harm had ever come from art?

Productivity began to lag. On three occasions miners bored far too close to Its burrow. This was dismissed as coincidence by some, but the engineering caste realized that the Dream Pull of this Class X was several hundred kilohertz stronger than any others we had encountered. We decided to close mining operations in two years’ time, and we began placing atomic bombs around the surface of the world. One of our bio-engineers developed the dream suppressant, and everyone was ordered to take this on a regular basis. At first the artist caste refused, but after several executions compliance was offered.

Or so we thought.

In fact, a large cult of the Unnamable began to meet in the desert when both were full. They developed several disgusting behaviors involving sounds, smells, and self-mutilation. They drew converts from all castes and all genders. This would not have been a problem until they began spreading the “good news” to others of our kind on the home world. The “good news” was that the Unnamable could offer some sort of bodily immortality. This religious idea even spread to other species. Their rituals became more violent—and in some strange way it increased the Dream Pull. I even had dreams of a particularly disgusting nature, wherein I flew (as though with wings) to one of their orgies and did strange things there. Despite the revolting nature of the deeds my dream-self performed, I was filled with strange joys—and frankly neglected my work for some days.

When it was discovered that the dream-sect was gaining a strong foothold on the home world, it became obvious that we needed to take the semi-sleeping corpse out of the galaxy. If It Awakened here it would devastate us as much as Azathoth had done with the insect race of Shaggai. The engineering class decided to remove a section of the planet and simply drive it out of our galaxy. We knew that this was suicide, but if we simply tried to shoot the corpse outward, It might awaken and could easily steer

the vessel with gravity waves. Many of the cultists were rounded up and dumped on our world. Thousands more were simply executed.

And so we sailed into the void.

The cult flourished as more and more of us lost consciousness and became religious. Those who remained in charge of the asteroid began using a stronger dream suppressor. We began to wear thin armor made of the metal from Tond, which also seems to deflect dreams. Then a dangerous new phenomenon caught our attention. The Unnamable had begun to mutate. It was growing multi-colored metal spines. We were unsure of their function, but the religious horde began demanding that we turn off the force field so that they could impale themselves on the spines. This would enable them to participate in the eternal nature of their “god.” This is a word they used to describe a Class X sentient. We suspected that the spines enable a direct level of control or communion with the Unnamable.

This situation lasted for a year. We were moving at several times light speed, so it appeared to us that all the stars had collapsed into a single point of brightness in front of us. The art of the religious became highly stylized, showing various bipeds of a type unknown to us, who wrapped up their dead or occasionally decapitated their dead and gave them the head of a non-sentient beast. These images were said to be of the future or “heaven.” The hybrid bodies also had the multi-colored spines in them. During one sleeping period the religious horde attacked. We slew most of them, but they damaged our armor with a strange acid. Dreams began to leak into our minds.

The glory of Gla’aki Awakening!

There I have thought His Name! *Zodacare od zoderamu Gla’aki! Zim! Zim!*

I am trying not to think of Him. I am trying not to host His Desires. I can feel his itch to lose the spines, each full of His Essence. I dream of other worlds and other ways of being as strange to me as sight would be a creature without eyes, or as xlyth would be to a creature without nandeemi. Gla’aki was with others before this universe was even created as a game board. I can dream of their moments of death, their moments of rebirth. I can dream of the ecstasy they felt merging with Gla’aki. I can dream of the future when He shall smash the crystal trapdoor we made from him and

swim into a cold lake on another world. I can dream of his joy meeting his younger brother Vulthoom.

I take the dream suppressor, but it has no effect. A few of the highest caste have pieced together anti-dream armor from fragments that survived the attack. The blue tongues have driven us from the city, from the portal through which we can view our Lord. But this has no meaning. We are building a Dream Bore that will eat through their force field. We know it will denude this little world of atmosphere, but that does not matter. Our small five-space minds will dissolve into Him. We will help find His way on a new world—one that He senses teems with Class IX and Class X sentients. It will be a world rich in servitors.

Our attack comes after the next sleeping period. Many of our kind will die. It is no matter. I will leave this dream shard as my testimony. It will help others attune to Gla'aki; they are not as evolved as we on this new world, but they will do until Gla'aki can evolve a race of (at least) Class II sentients.

* * *

And at last I became me, James Gresh again. I was safely locked away. I had no job at this point, no home, no car, no Amanda. My mom had died and with some irony I discovered that Bart's parents were paying for my upkeep. I watch TV (although I have been known to have panic attacks if I see a Vulcan or an elf on the screen). Some of Giger's art is a little spot-on for me as well. I enjoy my time in the garden. I know Gla'aki slumbers fitfully in the dead city beneath the lake. I know that if I ever got away from this place I would seek Him out; that I would beg to have one of Spines pierce me. My doctors have some amusingly Freudian interpretations of *that*. And in a sense they are not wrong: it is all about ecstasy—just far, far more than they can ever conceive.

Most days I am sad for humans because I know the day will come when He will burst through the crystal trapdoor that holds part of his being in check. I know that humans will literally last only days when this happens. I know religion and magic are diseases that He and His Relatives have given us. But then the Dreams come and I say the words and make the gestures

that affect the warp and weave of space-time. I know He will make a better race to follow us, more self-aware, with a greater sensory range. I hope they will serve Him well.

I wait. I love. I wait. I love. I wait.

The Mystery of the Cursed Cottage

DAVID HAMBLING

David Hambling lives in Norwood, South London, the setting for his web of Lovecraftian tales. These focus on the 1920s and include the collection The Dulwich Horror and Others and the Harry Stubbs adventures—The Elder Ice, Broken Meats, and Alien Stars. He is otherwise known as a science and technology journalist and cat lover.

SURREY, ENGLAND 1928



HE INSPECTOR LED THE WAY THROUGH THE WOODS, followed by the two civilians, with the stout constable bringing up the rear. The inspector walked at the brisk pace of a man who knew the path well and expected the others to keep up, a man who did not care that green buds tipped every twig in Seesin's Copse, or that the bluebells were peeping out from the forest floor. Late spring sunshine turned the crisp layer of oak leaves on the ground to gold, but the path had been trodden soggy and black by the passage of many feet.

"It's muddy in places—I should have warned you," said the inspector, glancing back to Miss Belhaven. "But I see you have good walking shoes. Of course, a psychic would foresee the conditions!"

Miss Belhaven laughed politely.

"Does either of you read detective fiction?" asked the inspector.

"I'm afraid not," said Blake. "Although I have studied a few unusual real-life criminal cases."

"A pity. This is as close to the perfect locked-room mystery as you're likely to find."

This perfect mystery was, of course, the reason Blake and Miss Belhaven had been dragged out to this spot. The invitation to Blake to assist the police with their enquiries had been a blunt one, falling barely short of a threat if he failed to cooperate. Blake doubted whether Miss Belhaven had come entirely of her own free will either.

"Are you a criminologist, Mr. Blake?" she asked, speaking to him for the first time. Her accent was decidedly lower middle class, but social distinctions meant little to Blake. He had already warmed to her as a fellow

victim, and did not care for the way the inspector chafed her about psychic powers. He felt the shared pain of being laughed at for “strange” ideas.

“Not a criminologist, just an academic,” he said. “A mere schoolteacher, really. And call me William, please.”

Blake wondered what she made of him. He was tall and athletic but walked with a limp; though not yet thirty, he looked years older. His clothes were of good quality, but he dressed carelessly. Blake supposed that, to her, he must look like an eccentric scholar.

“I’m Elizabeth,” she said.

“And did the inspector say you were a psychic?”

“Some people say I have a gift for sensing vibrations,” she said, carefully reciting the phrase. Mockery had made her cautious. “I’m not a professional medium. You don’t happen to know the Norwood Theosophist Circle?”

“You see that there?” said the inspector, pointing to an old tree stump. “That is recent.”

Blake realised the inspector was not indicating the stump itself but a carving on it—a rough shape chiselled into the wood suggestive of three intersecting circles.

“What is it?” asked Miss Belhaven.

“A pagan rune or sigil, I believe,” said Blake. “Patterns like this date back to the pre-Celtic Bronze Age. I don’t know the meaning of this particular one.”

“Stage dressing is the technical term,” said the inspector with a thin smile. He allowed them a few seconds to take in the carving before marching on again.

“If you’re a schoolteacher,” Miss Belhaven asked, “why did the police ask you—?”

“Didn’t you know? It was Mr. Blake who solved the mystery of the Dulwich Horror,” cut in the inspector. “People died, and there was all sorts of supernatural talk until Mr. Blake put a stopper on it with a proper scientific explanation. A feat which we are hoping he will be able to repeat. Now here we have it, the actual cottage, the ‘Cursed Cottage’ as our press like to call it.”

The low whitewashed building seemed to have sprouted under the oaks like a strange mushroom. It was roughly rectangular, the mossy roof set atop it like a lid on a saucepan. The cottage had been spruced up with fresh

paintwork and new windows and door, but there were old bones beneath the painted skin.

“It’s what you might call a ‘rude dwelling,’” said the inspector in the manner of a tour guide. He proceeded to lead them in a circuit around the cottage while PC Robertson remained outside the front door, feet planted apart, looking at once as firmly rooted as the old oaks on every side.

“It’s a genuine wattle-and-daub construction, which is of some relevance. Three windows, all of them secured tightly, one door ditto, and the chimney has been bricked up. There’s just a flue for the stove with a diameter of three and a half inches. One door, which was securely locked and barred from the inside—as you see, it was broken down. No trap-doors or hidden tunnels anywhere. My men know how to conduct a search. They also measured the inside and outside dimensions of the building, and you may rest assured there are no concealed cavities.”

“And the well—” Blake nodded towards the stone well, which showed signs of recent repairs.

“We sent a man down it on a rope and dragged it,” said the Inspector. “Not a thing.”

Behind the cottage was a small, untended vegetable plot. Further into the trees stood a lopsided wooden privy.

“We made a pretty thorough inspection,” said the inspector. “And nowhere did we find the slightest trace of Mr. Potter.”

As they came back around to the front, the inspector directed them to go in. “The interior has been left as nearly as possible how we found it,” he said.

The cottage was unexpectedly small, a dingy one-room affair that smelled of mildew. The ceiling was low, and with three of them inside it felt crowded.

“You will notice the bars on the windows,” said the inspector, touching one with an index finger, still addressing them as a tour guide. “The new plaster ceiling”—he rapped it with his knuckles—“is completely intact, and the tiles on the roof above show no sign of being moved. We broke into the cavity anyway, but there’s nothing there but dust and rat bones. The walls, being made of mud and sticks . . . it’s not a brick wall where somebody could remove a few bricks, crawl through the hole, and replace them afterwards with quick-setting mortar. The walls have not been breached.”

“I see,” said Blake, as the nature of the locked room became more clear. The cottage was almost hermetically sealed. No wonder the police had been puzzled by Potter’s disappearance.

“And, as a final point, the missing man’s spectacles and watch are there on the shelf by the bed. We have it on good authority that he was blind as a bat without his glasses and never went anywhere without them. The only spare pair are in his overnight case by the washstand. His wife and his optician confirm there is no other. Oh, and of course the key is still in the lock, on the inside.”

Having completed the tour, the inspector took a final look around and drew up the cottage’s one chair. From an inner pocket he drew a much-folded newspaper which he passed to Blake. “The rest of it is in the newspaper—you can read for yourself.”

With that, the inspector sat down, put his feet up on a stool, took out his pipe, and proceeded to light it. The guided tour was over.

“Just to make it clear,” the inspector added as an afterthought. “I’m looking for an explanation of how Potter disappeared from inside here. An explanation which does not involve dematerialisation, astral travel, elemental spirits, higher-dimensional beings, or disintegration rays. We’ve got plenty of those sort of explanations already, thank you. I want something I can deliver to the chief inspector with scientific backing.”

Blake sat on the bed. After a moment Miss Belhaven seated herself next to him, and together they read the double-page spread beneath the banner headline “Curse of the Witch’s Cottage Claims Victim!”

Seesin Coppice had been sold recently. The cottage was part of the property, but the old woman who lived there had no tenancy agreement. Mrs. Attwater had lived without rent for longer than anyone could remember. Potter, the new owner, was a city man, and had no patience with the farmers who told him that Mrs. Attwater was a fixture and should not be disturbed. He promptly evicted her, planning to turn the cottage into a holiday retreat.

“It’s a pretty spot for a holiday,” said Miss Belhaven. “So peaceful and quiet, with the flowers, and the wind in the trees. You’d never think it was so close to London.”

Mrs. Attwater was supposed to be a hundred years old. She lived a solitary life and was locally believed to be a witch. Parents would scare

their children by telling them that Old Mother Attwater would boil them up in her cauldron and eat them if they did not behave. During the eviction proceedings, Mrs. Attwater had been forced to leave the cottage and travel to the county court, where she had met Potter in the entrance hall. She shouted abuse at him for stealing her home and swore that he would never have it, pointing her finger at him and uttering a malediction in a strange tongue.

He had surprised witnesses by responding in no less abusive terms, and adding a few words in the same peculiar language. The outraged old woman had dropped dead on the spot of an apoplexy.

"The witch had died," noted the newspaper. "But like that of Tutankhamen, her curse retained its potency. Potter—bravely or foolishly—decided to tackle this curse head on!"

Potter had the cottage renovated and redecorated, and announced that he would spend a weekend there himself to show that the curse meant nothing. A local farmer was the last to see him, visiting on the Friday evening with a jug of milk. He said that Potter had seemed cheerful, but noted how quickly the door was locked and barred behind him after he left.

The next morning, when the farmer came with a basket of new eggs for the gentleman's breakfast, the door was still barred and there was no reply. The curtains were open, and from the window the farmer could see that Potter was not in his bed. He thought that Potter must have had an attack and must be lying on the floor below his line of sight. He hurried to the village to raise the alarm.

The local doctor and the village policeman came back to the cottage with the farmer, and the three of them broke down the door. They were amazed to find no sign of Potter inside.

The story of the disappearance might have gone no further than the village, but a London journalist turned up the same morning. He had written up Mrs. Attwater's death and had the idea of interviewing the cottage's new owner and asking if he had seen any ghosts or other supernatural manifestations. With a little embellishment, a haunted house will always make a good story. The journalist was disappointed at the modern appearance of the cottage, but soon found a much better story. The farmer, the doctor, and the police officer all spoke freely to their sympathetic listener of their puzzlement.

The journalist filed a lengthy and colourful report. There was no sign of Potter anywhere. The missing man's family and business contacts confirmed that he had not been seen. The story of the mysterious disappearance from the cursed cottage was taken up by several other papers. Technically, no crime had been reported, but the chief inspector decided it would be politic for the force to produce a solution to the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Potter.

An investigation was carried out, but no solution was forthcoming. In the subsequent weeks, dozens of members of the public wrote in with their own solutions. The newspapers squeezed more pages out of it with each new suggestion, and there was a danger that the matter would escalate and become the talk not just of the county but of the entire country.

"There's very little information about Potter himself in this article," said Blake.

The inspector moved his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Not much to tell. He's been in the property business for some time. Lives in Croydon, a perfectly respectable man—as far as anyone knows. No money troubles that might make him want to vanish. He's made a practice of finding undervalued properties, buying them up, doing them up, and selling them. He has a wife at home, who is as mystified as everyone else, and a couple of children. We are in the process of looking for some 'other woman,' which—I'm afraid, Miss Belhaven—generally turns out to be the reason for a married man disappearing."

"But you haven't had any luck," said Blake.

"Not yet, Mr. Blake," said the inspector. "But we won't stop looking. He's gone somewhere, and my money says he slipped out of here and is in Paris with some chorus girl right now. Laughing at us."

"You don't believe he came here to prove that there wasn't a curse?"

"I believe that if you wanted to make your disappearance look mysterious, then it's better to be last seen in a haunted cottage than on a platform at Waterloo Station with a suitcase. The whole thing is staged."

"He can't have staged Mrs. Attwater's death," said Blake. "Without that there wouldn't be any cursed cottage."

"He took advantage of the situation. He saw the possibilities."

"Old women don't curse people," objected Miss Belhaven. "That must have been made up by the paper."

“Journalistic licence,” supplied Blake. “Like the rat that appeared out of her clothing and ran away when they took her to the ambulance.”

“That was horrible,” she said, with a small shudder.

“As a matter of fact, both parts of the story are genuine,” said the inspector. “She did indeed curse Potter very much as described. And the old woman did have a pet rat on her. Both of the stretcher bearers commented on it—as you can imagine they might! I don’t say she was a witch: the allegations about cauldrons, boiling children, and casting spells have not been substantiated and I daresay never will be. But I’m sure keeping a rat would be enough to get her branded a witch round these parts. A very unhygienic practice, to be sure.”

“She certainly fits the classic image of the witch,” said Blake. “An old woman, living alone in the woods—I take it she had no relations?”

“Definitely not,” said the inspector. “We thought there might be a family member wanting to get even with Mr. Potter, but we were unable to find a single relative. Or even her own birth record.”

“Poor old woman,” said Miss Belhaven. “No children and nobody to talk to, and a pet rat, called a witch by everyone.”

“Being a witch was not such a bad thing,” said the inspector. “It was because of her reputation that she lived rent-free. All the local farmers used to bring round gifts of food. They’re a superstitious crowd here; nobody wants their cows’ milk turned sour.”

There was a long leather case against the bed, a gun case, and an unopened box of shells by it on the window sill. Blake noted they were Number Nine shot, useless for any except the smallest game, generally employed for shooting rats in barns.

“Maybe Potter was going to shoot some rabbits,” said Blake, thinking aloud. He did not remember any rabbit holes in the wood. “Or maybe he was thinking of killing himself, but found another way out.”

The inspector shrugged and puffed his pipe.

“He brought a lot of books for a weekend stay,” said Miss Belhaven. The books were lined up on a shelf with two bottles of relish for bookends. She looked at the volumes and passed them to Blake.

“Margaret Murray . . . Montague Summers . . . and good old Frazer.” Blake held up *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. “So Potter had a genuine interest in witchcraft. He brought quite a little reference library with him.”

There were more books beside the bed and next to the stove. All were on similar topics, including a rare, unexpurgated copy of Hartmann, as well as von Junzt's work on diabolic cults. This last book included illustrations of hieroglyphs. Blake found one which resembled the carving they had seen, and pointed it out to the inspector. It was associated with the Horned God. To Blake the shape suggested an unhuman three-lobed eye.

"Yes, we saw that," said the inspector, bored. "Magic, but not the variety practised by Harry Houdini, the sort that might actually help solve the case. To me those books and the sigil on the tree stump look like an attempt to highlight the spurious supernatural connexion. He might as well have left a note: 'I can hear her ghostly fingers scratching at the door . . .'"

"Potter had been studying witchcraft for years." Blake showed the inspector the date and initials inscribed inside the flyleaf. "You know Margaret Murray's theory? She thinks that the witch-covens were survivors of a pre-Christian pagan cult. This would be the right place for it. There was a long tradition of the charcoal-burners in these woods practising a form of pagan worship, away from the church—"

Blake broke off, aware the inspector was no longer listening. He started again:

"I don't suppose you know if there's a Celtic altar in the wood? Just a block of stone probably?"

"I don't suppose I do," replied the inspector. "It would hardly be germane, since we are not going to be charging a Celtic deity with the disappearance, are we now?"

"If you're only interested in material facts, I'm not sure what you expect of me," said Miss Belhaven.

The inspector gave her a cold smile.

"Your role, Miss Belhaven, is to give us some insight into more practical matters. Spirit-mediums are well known for their tricks. The medium is tied up, or placed in a locked closet, but still manages to produce writing on a chalk-board, or play musical instruments, when the lights are out. They use clever little devices with fishing line and such. Perhaps with a bit of string you could turn a key in the lock from the other side. Or lower a bar on the door, with a line and a knot that can undone afterwards. We couldn't do it, but perhaps we need someone who knows the tricks of the trade."

Miss Belhaven coloured as the inspector said this. Blake placed an arm on her shoulder before she could speak.

"You're accusing her of being a fraud," said Blake. "That's a rotten way to treat someone who's come here to help. If you wanted a stage-magician, you should have invited one."

The inspector shrugged again, as if to say he might try that next, and drew on his pipe.

"You might be able to sense something," Blake said, turning to Miss Belhaven. "If anything happened here, there might be a psychic imprint, or whatever the term is."

"I thought you were a scientific man, Blake," said the inspector behind him.

"I believe in radio waves, even though I can't see them," said Blake. "I'm not so pig-headed as to think there can't be other sorts of waves."

Miss Belhaven closed her eyes and breathed slowly and evenly. Blake looked out the window at the brown carpet of leaves, splashed with patches of blue flowers, under the spreading canopy. Everything was peaceful. Not a bird sang.

"Miss Belhaven—Elizabeth—do you sense a presence here?" Blake asked. "The spirit of a departed one?"

"Oh go on," said the inspector from his chair. "Do call up Potter and ask him where he's got to."

"You're not obliged," said Blake.

"It's so quiet," she said at last. "There's nothing here. It's as though the whole forest is filled with silence. Hushed, like a cathedral. I'm afraid to think too loud—it echoes. There's just a very faint murmur . . ."

She frowned and opened her eyes again.

"I'd prefer not to stay here too long." She swallowed. "It's rather disturbing."

"Inspector, would you mind if Miss Belhaven went back to the car? Psychic experiments can be risky. Staying here might be harmful for her."

"I'd prefer the both of you to stay and focus on the matter in hand," said the inspector. "Perhaps this menacing psychic presence will help motivate you."

Miss Belhaven paced about the small room, then stooped and picked something off the floor by the stove. She passed a small piece of ivory to

Blake.

"The police may be trained in searching," she said, "but none of them ever had to clean a house."

Blake examined the object, then got down on to his hands and knees to examine the floor. There were a number of small holes at the base of the wall, which he pointed out to the inspector.

"We thought those might support the fishing-line theory," said the inspector. "Some arrangement of holes to thread the wire through. But I am told they were made by rodents, who can gnaw through daub-and-wattle construction without difficulty."

"The holes must be recent if the place has just been renovated," said Blake, half to himself.

"Of course Mr. Potter may have liquefied himself and flowed out through the holes, being a magician," the inspector continued facetiously. "But, as with spontaneous combustion or vaporisation, that's not a hypothesis we are willing to entertain—not without bloody good evidence. Pardon my language, Miss."

Blake was still looking at the rat-holes. Why were there several holes and not just one?

"Here's another," said Miss Belhaven. When he looked up she handed him a second piece of ivory. He then stood up and passed both pieces to the inspector.

"Do these have some sort of magical significance?" the inspector asked.

"They have more significance than that," said Blake, who had picked up one of Potter's books and was leafing through the index. "Don't you recognise human teeth?"

"Did you just hear something outside?" asked Miss Belhaven.

The inspector shook his head and looked enquiringly at Blake.

"Here it is," Blake said, and skimmed through the relevant passage. "Rats. 'Mistress Loggard did confess to an imp in the likeness of a rat which the Devil had given to her . . . did then confess that the imp sucked of her blood . . .'"

"Is that a witchcraft trial?" asked Miss Belhaven.

"Get out!"

All three were startled by the shout from outside. The door was flung open.

“Get out!” shouted PC Robertson again, and this time they could hear a long, creaking note, counterpointed by rending, tearing sounds.

The three of them bolted from the cottage, right under the shadow of the old oak tree as it toppled majestically. Blake thought he would be crushed, but the tree fell so slowly that he was clear by the time the oak landed squarely on the cottage, the great trunk plunging through the tiled roof and crushing it like an egg carton.

The noise continued for some time as still more of the tree’s sinews snapped, branches crumpled, and the tree settled into its final position.

“Robertson, you damn fool!” bellowed the inspector at the constable, who looked both relieved and unhappy.

“I’m sorry, sir, I was looking the other way, and I didn’t notice the tree until I heard it—”

“Idiot!” The inspector raised a hand as though he would have slapped the constable, but with visible effort he stepped back and mastered his temper.

“It was deliberate,” said Blake, standing by the fallen tree. “The trunk was cut through.”

“With you standing here on guard!” exclaimed the inspector. “We could all have been killed.” He strode over to examine the damage.

“It wasn’t meant to kill us,” said Blake. “Just to force us out of the cottage.”

Blake and the inspector looked up at the same time, to see something watching them from a tree branch overhead. It was the size of a squirrel, with a long, naked tail. But it was not the tail that made both men gasp before the creature scampered out of sight around the tree.

“What’s that sound?” asked Miss Belhaven, moving her head from left to right to catch the source.

“Wind in the trees,” said Blake.

“No,” she said. “It’s the leaves rustling.”

She pointed to where the carpet of brown leaves shimmered like waves on a storm-lashed sea. The waves were approaching across the forest floor, waves thrown up not by the wind but by something several yards across, moving just beneath the surface.

Blake was still gazing on in horror when Miss Belhaven seized his hand and pulled at him, shouting “Run!”

She did not need to see what was coming. They both knew what was coming and how dangerous it would be to stay. The inspector caught on a moment later, and was a few paces behind them, his sense of danger sharpened by the earlier narrow escape.

“Robertson, run!” he ordered, and the bewildered constable started behind them.

Blake’s limp disappeared at times of danger, and he had been a strong runner. Miss Belhaven’s skirt may have been unfashionable but it was not constricting, and she kept pace with him. The inspector struggled to keep up.

The most handicapped of the four was the portly PC Robertson, who did not have the sharp spur of fear driving him onwards. Robertson liked his food and had not much cause to exert himself in the line of duty. He could not have been called fit.

The rushing sound rose to a crescendo, and the wave of dry leaves broke behind them.

It is said that there was a school of dark arts in Toledo, where at their graduation the class of students had to traverse an underground chamber en masse. The devil himself would pursue them through the chamber, catching the slowest member of the class and claiming him. This is said to be the source of the phrase “devil take the hindmost.”

It is also said that a rat can outrun a man over short distances.

Blake glanced back at a muffled sound behind him and saw that Robertson had stumbled and fallen. The brown wave broke over him as hundreds of rats broke out from under the leaves.

Just as the piranha fish of the Amazon are supposed to seethe and swarm over their prey, the policeman was instantly submerged in a mass of writhing, biting rats, many of them of unusual size, driven by a carnivorous ferocity.

PC Robertson gave just one stifled cry as he fell. Blake saw the man’s arms flail around as he rolled and fought to throw off the attackers swarming over him. Several were scattered, two rats flew through the air, but hundreds more converged on the policeman, while more were surging towards Blake.

Blake did not stop running. The second time he looked back, Robertson’s face and head were covered with rats. More rats were already

inside his clothing. The blue serge uniform pulsed with them, like a carcass bursting with maggots just beneath the skin.

A hundred yards more and Blake glanced back again, then slowed to a stop. Without his own feet kicking through the leaves, the only noise was from the others ahead of him. There were no sounds of struggle from behind.

"They've stopped following!" he called.

Miss Belhaven held on to a tree. The inspector stood poised, irresolute. Blake took off and went back in the direction they had come from.

"You stay here, Miss," ordered the inspector.

Blake steered around the seething mass where PC Robertson had fallen and burst into the cottage. He tore open the box of shells, dropping them everywhere. At every moment he expected rats to come swarming through the open doorway.

He broke open the shotgun and stuffed in two cartridges, managing to snap it shut on his second try. Blake scanned the trees as he stepped out, looking for anything in the branches. As the inspector appeared through the trees, moving warily, Blake approached the spot where PC Robertson had stumbled, a spot now occupied by a brown, seething, amorphous shape.

Blake had a vague impression of glinting eyes, whiskered noses, and flashes of yellow teeth as the rats scuttled about, of dark, wet fur, and long bare tails whipping around behind them. They swarmed like ants on a log, two deep, the rats running over one another, not distinct as individuals. The pack was entirely intent on the fallen man.

The shotgun boomed. The blast went wide, kicking up an oval patch of leaves a few feet from the body. The rats scattered like a startled flock of birds, fanning out away from Blake and the inspector, disappearing under the leaves and becoming irregular ripples. The ripples spread outward and faded, the great rushing sound dying away as quickly as it had come, the last few stragglers emerging from uniform sleeves and collar.

PC Robertson's uniform was black with blood. As Blake approached, he saw a hole in the man's neck the size of a half-crown. A final rat squeezed out, paused a moment, shook itself, and darted away before Blake could raise the shotgun.

"There's your solution," said Blake. His voice was surprisingly firm. He might have been introducing a lesson in class. "I hoped to bag a few of

them as evidence, but I couldn't shoot at him. I assume you got a decent enough view, and your testimony must count for something. And any coroner will be able to tell cause of death."

"Yes, quite so," said the inspector, not moving any closer to the body. Neither of them suggested checking whether the fallen man might still be alive. "Quite so. Cause of death . . . shouldn't be much room for doubt there. No doubt at all. My God, look at him. Five minutes ago he was standing there; now look at him . . ."

Blake waited, scanning the trees. Everything was perfectly quiet. They could smell the body now, the tang of fresh blood.

"I don't suppose there's any brandy or anything in the cottage?" Blake asked.

The inspector shook his head mechanically.

"Let's get Miss Belhaven and go back to the car," said Blake. "We need to get help."

Blake broke the shotgun open and took the inspector by the arm. The other man moved like a sleepwalker.

Some hours later Blake was in the inspector's office at the police station. Miss Belhaven's statement regarding PC Robertson's death had been taken, and she had been discharged. Blake was helping the inspector draft an account of the case that he would be able to submit, an account that might be believed by those who had not seen it with their own eyes.

"The story for public consumption is this," said Blake. "Mrs. Attwater was an eccentric old woman with a fondness for rats. She petted them and fed them. She even allowed one of them to drink her blood. If you check with the coroner you'll probably find there was an unhealed wound where a rat could have sucked.

"This resulted in a large colony of rats being established near her cottage. The local farmers gave her food—much more than one old woman could have eaten. She fed the rats; they were feral, but like a lion-tamer she could keep them in check with her authority and by controlling their food supply.

"After she died, the rats were hungry. They still associated the cottage with food. They gnawed their way back in. Potter was here, he raised a commotion . . . they overwhelmed him. And they ate him. All of him. Every bit. Rats can gnaw through anything—wood, copper, lead piping.

Chewing through the bones may have taken an hour or two; about the only thing they can't bite through would be his teeth.

"And that's your locked room mystery solved. Potter's body left that room in the stomachs of a thousand rats. Only his teeth remained.

"As for today's events: perhaps the best we can say is that during the investigation, Constable Robertson disturbed the rats' nest. Because of their vicious nature and lack of fear of humans they attacked him too."

The inspector's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"But about that—that thing—on the tree?"

"Oh, that," said Blake. An hour ago he had wanted to blast the inspector with the whole truth, force him to swallow it in one gulp. Now, hearing the tremor in the inspector's voice, Blake softened. He was not a vindictive man.

"Ugly little brute, wasn't it? Just a deformed rat. It startled me too when I saw it. She probably adopted that one because it was unable to fend for itself. You know how people always make pets of the runt of the litter."

"But its face . . ." The inspector took Blake's arm.

"A deformed rat and nothing more," Blake went on smoothly, extemporising from scraps of remembered fact. "Rats have an unusually high rate of birth defects, because of the amount of toxic material they eat. Rats can't vomit, you know, so they are prone to poisoning. The deformed ones used to be called Sumatran; people thought they were a separate species. They can look strange . . . even the trained mind can fall prey to suggestibility when you spend too long in a witch's cottage!"

The inspector let go of Blake's arm and straightened up.

"So there is a scientific explanation," said the inspector. "Birth defects—toxic material—Attwater adopted the runt. It all makes sense."

"I'm glad I could help."

"Thank you very much for your work, Mr. Blake," said the inspector in a stronger voice. He shook Blake's hand with a firm grip. "Your contribution towards clearing this up has been greatly appreciated. Let me know if there's ever anything I can do."

Walking home from the police station, Blake mulled over the things he had not said. Not that there was any need to say them; PC Robertson's death and the shattering of the locked room had shaken the inspector quite enough. The solid certainties of walls and doors had been broken; the

inspector would never be quite secure in the logic of the daylight world again. Blake did not feel he had the right to push the man any further towards the edge.

Mother Attwater was even older than the locals said. She was probably the original occupant of the seventeenth-century cottage. She would have taken over from the previous keeper of the Seesin's Copse, probably by killing them if Frazer's theories of pagan religion were correct. Blake knew enough of the practices hinted at by Hartmann and von Junzt to guess how she had unnaturally prolonged her life. Where the oldest trees grew would be an altar stone. Perhaps the old woman had only carried out one sacrifice a year on All Hallow's Eve. The priestess would have had the first draught of life-giving blood; the rest of the sacrifice would have gone to the four-footed celebrants.

The altar was to Cerunnos, the Horned God, the ram-horned serpent, god of the Hunt, the stag—also god of rats. A deity with many forms and none, a trickster who was Pan and Herne and a thousand others, whose real self was veiled behind layers of allegory. A being quickly identified with the devil by horrified monks in the Dark Ages.

How stupid Potter had been to think he could take over. How ignorant not to realise that Cerunnos' acolyte must be a woman.

The creature which looked down at them from the tree with its malevolent, impish eyes must have been Attwater's familiar, the link between her and the rats. The devil gave witches their familiars—that was what the witch-finders said. Few scholars had troubled to dig deeper, and fewer still could follow the trail of disputed and mistranslated fragments recounting the blasphemous beings that Cerunnos and the other Old Gods had begotten on mankind.

Blake hoped that the police would move into the copse in force and bring a good number of terrier-men with them to kill every rat they found there. He hoped most especially they would kill the one which had looked down on them. The rat with the face of a cruel old woman.

To Court the Night

K. A. OPPERMAN

K. A. Opperman is a poet of horror and fantasy influenced by H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Edgar Allan Poe, and David Park Barnitz. His debut collection, The Crimson Tome, was published by Hippocampus Press in 2015. His poems "In Fits of Wildest Dreaming" and "The Blood Garden" appeared in Ellen Datlow's recommended list in Best Horror of the Year, Volume Eight. His poem "The Lady in White" appeared in the HWA's Poetry Showcase 2016.

*It was at midnight, while the imp of Sleep
Yet frolicked with the sylphs beyond my grasp,
That I espied the blood-red book whose clasp
Was wrought of bronze, and then began to weep.*

*For was it not the fabled Crimson Tome
That I had once beheld in childhood dream?—
It lay upon my desk in doubtful gleam
Of sallow candles set against the gloam.*

*I had awaited this for fifty years—
To glimpse its haunted pages just one time!
So as the clock declared its thirteenth chime,
And daemons whispered madness in my ears,*

*I opened up the pretty clasp and pored
Over vermillion verses eviler
And more diseased than I could then endure—
I howled for mercy and misericord!*

*I heard the tainted laughter of the ghouls
Borne on the winds that through the window swirled
To strow dead leaves of autumn, sere and curled,
Upon the carpet, where strange pixie-stools*

*Began to fruit with foul fecundity
And sneer with half-formed faces—where the wild
Demesne of Nature had, I saw, defiled
My gloomy chamber's far profundity.*

*Nearly ensnared, I braved the ivy vines
That slithered past the threshold of the night*

*To clutch the claw-foot chairs—an aconite
Of primal nature spreading creeping tines*

*Of pagan poison through my home's warm heart!
I hurtled headlong through the window, wide
Unto the Night, to court my darkling bride,
A victim of her necromantic art.*

*O Nightmare Muse! She of the long, dark hair!—
She of fair flesh and poisoned apple lips!
She plied a pendulum of swaying hips,
Her sable gown whipped up on windy air.*

*Yes, I had seen her walking by the woods,
And so I hastened toward their gloomy verge;
A distant owl sang out its mournful dirge,
And somber monks, in ranks of brownish hoods,*

*Bore forth a coffin from a chapel carved
With evil gargoyles, which regarded them
With hungry grins, as if they would condemn
The precious corpse unto the ghouls long-starved.*

*The hungry ghouls! I heard their laughter still
And followed it among the clutching trees.
The scent of rot was strong upon the breeze—
Dead autumn leaves, exhumed cadavers chill.*

*The crescent moon ascended murky skies—
For night is darkest 'neath her silver horns;
Aldebaran, above the dream-held bourns,
Beamed like a crimson flame that slowly dies.*

*I came at last upon a graveyard gate
Whose Gothic lacework ivy-overgrown
Hung just ajar, in nightshade breezes blown,
The iron hinges crying 'neath its weight.*

*A single lantern charmed the mist beyond,
And toward its ghostly light I slowly passed
'Mid ruined graves gray weeds had over-grassed,
Upon whose plots disturbing mushrooms spawned.*

*A pack of ghouls dispersed at my approach—
Mere phantom shapes that roamed the greenish mist
In search of corpses whom decay had kissed,
The rotting province of the pestful roach.*

*The lantern shone upon an open grave,
And in the coffin's purple velvet slept
A pallid beauty waiting to accept
The adoration of a living slave.*

*I laid me down inside her lavish bed,
To taste her lips, fair Proserpina's fruits;
In necrophilia's most proud pursuits
I would indulge, a lover of the dead.*

*But lo, her bosom held a heart's dim beat,
And from her mouth there stole a ghost of breath. . . .
Her lashes' fringed portcullis, closed on death,
Began to lift, her lilac lids replete*

*With promises of life ephemeral,
If only for a moment's romance doomed
Ere dawn of time. . . . But then some devil loomed
Above the grave, so fair, funereal.*

*And it was she, the Nightmare Muse, my queen,
Engowned in black, encrowned with cold, dead stars!
Her lips, a rose-bloom sapped with poison tars,
Promised a luscious kiss so deep, obscene,*

*And sensual that I could not resist
The promise of their cup, despite the pale*

*White-gowned beauty waking from the dwale
Of death beneath me, cheeks now scarlet-kissed.*

*And so I turned to bid the girl goodbye—
But only saw a desiccated corpse
A fruit with that foul mushroom-cap which warps
The dreams of men, and drinks them when they die.*

*I heard the harlot's laughter on the air,
And from that fungus-drugged mirage I fled
Into the autumn woodlands filled with dread,
Aldebaran an orange, eternal glare.*

*Among the ghouls, toward that dreamward star,
I stumbled on through Slumber's ebon gates,
After that black-gowned beauty who awaits
All foolish dreamers who dare dream too far.*

To Move Beneath Autumnal Oaks

W. H. PUGMIRE

W. H. Pugmire has been writing Lovecraftian weird fiction since the mid-1970s, after having first read H. P. Lovecraft while serving as a minister in Northern Ireland. A novel set entirely in Lovecraft's Dreamlands, written with David Barker, will be published in 2018. A new hardcover collection, An Ecstasy of Fear and Others, is forthcoming from Centipede Press.



STOOD IN THE HUNGRY PLACE AND WATCHED AS shovels dropped dirt over Catherine's lowered casket. A sudden breath of wind playing with my hair made me raise my eyes to the pale September sky, and I marveled again at the misty light of Sesqua Valley, how soft particles of daylight seemed to sparkle as they drifted high above our little congregation. Dante Chambers, attired in his clerical adornment, smiled sadly as he stepped to me and shook my hand.

"Thank you for your uttered prayers," I told him. "She loved the sound of Latin, and you spoke it beautifully."

"Peace be with you, Charles." As Dante turned to glance at the fellow nearest me, his mouth turned down with displeasure. "Good day, Mr. Williams," he intoned, and then he moved away from us and walked solemnly out of the walled graveyard. I turned and frowned also at the creature near me, noting how the fragrance emitted from his sallow flesh was similar to the sweet scent of the valley. The breeze moved the strands of dark hair that escaped from underneath his black Fedora-style hat, the rim of which partially concealed the fellow's fantastic silver eyes. The grotesque features of his face seemed, in some weird way, an actual assault on normalcy, and filled one with the outrageous idea that Simon Gregory Williams was not entirely human. His misshapen mouth suddenly curled and moved.

"Why do you gaze at me so, Stanton?"

"Do I? Sorry. I was trying to remember something from my childhood—something about this graveyard and how it was, in some odd way, disliked by you and your kind."

His eyes slanted. "My kind?"

"You silver-eyed children of the valley. What did my father used to call you? 'The shadow-spawn of Sesqua Valley'— something like that. And

there was something about the ground of the Hungry Place being forbidden to your kind.”

“Pah. Nothing is forbidden me. You’ve been away for so long a time, perhaps you have forgotten there are places in the valley that wear a kind of taint, where the ground is diseased and unhealthy. This is one such place. But you were always fond of this plot of death, and I remember when, as a child, you used to come to dance among its slates in moonlight.”

I chuckled at the memory. “And my mother would discover me and scold and snatch me away. She was always so nervous.”

My companion shrugged. “Your parents were problematic. Little wonder they escaped the valley once your sister reached womanhood. How they *fled*! How defiantly their offspring insisted on staying put.” His voice altered in tone, and his expression became sardonically playful. “But perhaps it was your sibling’s insanity they were fleeing, not the valley itself. How frightfully she shrieked at them when angry, and how the blood would trickle down her unfortunate face from the slashes her nails dug into her visage. How she would call out in darkness, your sister, to a thing she could not name. I found it so intriguing.”

“It’s amusing,” I told him, “to hear one as ugly as you speak of unfortunate faces.” A spasm of violent anger began to overwhelm me, and I could sense clouds of emotion gathering inside my eyes.

“Ah—the Hungry Place is beginning to have its effect on your human senses. That is one aspect of the taint it wears, you see—how it inspires a kind of maniacal emotion that aches to break out in violence. Does your blood begin to boil boil its veins? Do coiling clouds of gloom begin to seethe inside your brain?” He laughed as mockery twisted the shape of his repugnant mouth, and then he walked away and vanished into the woodland.

I loathed the beast, and yet I knew he was right; for as I knelt and clawed my fingers into the ground, a part of me wanted to sink beneath the sod and smell its varied elements of human rot, to blink specks of dirt from my eyes as my tongue paid tribute to the flesh of worms. I spat at earth, stood, and vacated the Hungry Place, then followed the road that led me to our family home, where I had spent many happy years of childhood. I wondered if I could be content, living there again. The one aspect of the valley that I really missed, on those few occasions when the valley came to

mind, was the fantastic grove of gigantic ancient oaks not far behind our house, where Catherine and I often played when young. It was strange that the memory of that grove was indeed the only recollection I had of Sesqua Valley after I had moved to another part of the country. All other memories had been wiped from reminiscence, as if some mental veil had been erected that kept the valley far from mind.

I reached my destination, but rather than go inside my home I walked toward the oak trees and their outspread limbs. Someone, long ago, had encircled the thick trunks with large rocks on which mystifying sigils had been etched, although most of the symbols were now so weathered as to be beyond deciphering. I approached the small shrine that our parents had helped us to erect out of blocks of stone and large bricks, a construction that resembled some religious shrines of Father's Roman Catholic faith. Our place of pilgrimage contained a small altar on which we would burn offerings to the gods of the woods; and as I approached that altar I was surprised to see the small pale object that rested on its long-abandoned platform. Strangely cautious, I went to the object and then, seeing clearly what it was, felt my blood grow cold; for it was my sister's favorite toy, an antique French doll attired in what had once been a lovely gown of white silk and lace. Now the gown and portions of the thing's face had been blackened by fire.

From some far-off place within the woodland I heard a melancholy playing of pipes, and I knew that Simon Gregory Williams was at his diabolic play. A chill wind began to whisper through the dendroidal stems above me, a noise that reminded me of the thing my sister and I had tried to evoke audibly as we chanted to imagined music. I began to hum the music that floated from the woodland, and as I peered into that distant expanse of trees I thought I saw two points of alabaster illumination that seemed to observe me. I thought again of the "children" of the valley, they who were called the valley's "shadow-spawn," of whom Simon was the eldest. Indeed, I remembered him from my childhood, as someone my kindred taught me to distrust and shun. There were only a handful of such beings in the valley at a given time—they came and then they disappeared, mysteriously; except for Simon, who seemed always to have been around, unchanging and aloof. We knew their race by their faces, a grotesque combination of frog-like and wolfish features, and by the almost magical

quality of their silver eyes, the surface of which shone like pale and polished nickel. These beings were rooted absolutely to the valley in which they lingered, and if anyone could connect with the spirit of the valley that my sister and I had tried to induce with childish ritual, it was this shadow-spawn.

Thus I listened attentively to the music from Simon's flute and imagined that the breeze that brushed my face grew cooler as it carried the remote music to my ears. From underneath the ground on which I stood came a subtle pounding, which I felt deep inside my bones. The dappled light that slipped to me through the limbs of trees darkened, as if it had turned to particles of ash; and as I gazed at that fuliginous curtain I seemed to sense the darker shadow that coiled behind it. Something in my brain snapped violently, and I rushed from the place and sped homeward, where I busied myself in the kitchen brewing water and preparing tea and toast.

How strange that I did not dream that night; for one would imagine that my brain would dwell on hinted horrors and infest my slumber with horrid vision, but instead I fell into a vacuum, sans imagined sight or sound. Having neglected to draw the bedroom curtains before going to bed, I was awakened by sunlight on my eyelids and found that I had slept in the clothing I had worn the previous day. Not bothering to change into fresh attire, I stumbled to the kitchen and made myself a cup of coffee, which I took to the porch and drank as I sat on Mother's old rocking chair. It did not surprise me when Simon Gregory Williams sauntered down the road before my home, pretending to read the book held in one hand.

"Are you haunting me?" I queried.

"I beg your pardon, sirrah."

"They were very clever, your tricks last night. What was it, exactly, that you summoned? Has it a name?"

He knitted his brow and frowned. "Sorry, I don't follow you. Do you think I have nothing better to do than oppress you with playful alchemy?"

"Oh, but I heard your damn flute performance while visiting the grove of oaks. And I sensed—"

"My dear fellow, if you're going to go dreaming at your childhood altar, it has nothing to do with me. Do you imagine that you can return to the valley and not be infected by your past? Do you think that children can call to Outer Darkness in ritual and not be answered? A thing evoked in

infanthood does not die merely because you flee the valley and linger in some far-off city for many years. That which is summoned with esoteric language does not dissipate; it links to the soul of whoever has called it, and however far that soul may journey, it always returns to the place of ceremony. As you have now returned.”

“And what do you imagine I have summoned?”

His laughter was a cruel sound, and his expression suggested that he thought himself speaking to one who was still a child. “You knew it in childhood, although it remained unnamable. It is the occult essence of Sesqua Valley, the core of which can be sensed in certain tainted places in the valley, such as the Hungry Place. Actually, William Davis Manly has written some few lines that sing of it splendidly, here in his book of verse. Mark his words, Stanton:

*“It whispers to me in the midnight zone.
The phantom voice, like product of some dream;
And I converse, although I’m quite alone,
And push my voice into the moonlight’s stream
Of phantom rays in which I seem to see
A silhouette, a dark fantastic form,
A thing that shudders in an ecstasy
That indicates a kind of mental storm.
I speak and tell the silhouette my name;
I listen as it signifies its own.
I look to where its spark blooms into flame,
A holocaust that will become my home.
I drift like smoke into the firelight,
Where all my fears and fantasies ignite.*

“Do not such lines speak to you, intimately, Stanton? Can you deny that they name the thing you and your sister knew in childhood, the thing that has whispered to you yet again? How your lips ache to name it, however much your heart shrinks at the idea of so doing.”

Demurely, he tilted his head and grinned at me; and then he shut his little book and continued down the road. Returning to the house, I found my own copy of Manly’s poems and read over them, relishing how they

suggested the secrets that were especial to my valley. Leaning back into my recliner, I shut my eyes, intending to rest and think; but soon I sank into slumber, and the dreams that had eluded me the night before found me, although they were nonsensical. I awakened to the storm that rattled window panes; and pushing out of my chair, I walked outside and watched the twisting trees as they danced in the night-wind. My nostrils took in the smells of autumn, and in the moonlight I espied a small cyclone of wind that lifted leaves into the air. The wind was a furious force, and walking into it I raised my arms as if defying the gale to topple me onto the ground. I heard, then, a subtle moaning beneath the rush of wind, a kind of whimper that reminded me of the sounds my sister would often make as she slept in the room that we had shared as children.

The wind lifted leaves that spun before me in the air, and I stalked through this kaleidoscope of motion and moved toward the grove of oaks. Approaching our altar, I suspected that I was still at home, dreaming; for how could the solid limbs of olden oaks stir so sensuously, as if coaxing me into their embrace? And what was the object that flamed atop the altar stone, that expanded so impossibly as I approached it? How could an antique doll take on the ruined features of my beloved sibling?

She reached out to me with blazing arms, and I found myself wound within her infernal embrace. “Do you remember how we wished to call to the essence of place, my brother?—how we tried to give name to the unnamable? Let us try again.”

She pressed her blackening mouth against my own, and our conjoined lips moved together. From some place very near I could hear the sound of flute music, and as I pushed my face from hers I imagined that black particles of ash circled all around us. I wanted so to speak the unknown name; but that appellation continued to evade me, and thus I spoke the name that burned inside my brain.

“Catherine!” I cried. She laughed and kissed my mouth again. The inferno of that kiss sizzled on my lips, my tongue. I spoke her name one final time, in that place of unholy ritual, as our burning essence broke apart and joined the particles of ash that coiled around us.

Mister Ainsley

STEVE RASNIC TEM

Steve Rasnic Tem's last novel, Blood Kin (Solaris, 2014), won the Bram Stoker Award. His new novel, UBO (Solaris, January 2017), is a dark science fiction tale about violence and its origins, featuring such historical viewpoint characters as Jack the Ripper, Stalin, and Heinrich Himmler. He is also a past winner of the World Fantasy and British Fantasy Awards.

Recently a collection of the best of his uncollected horror tales— Out of the Dark: A Storybook of Horrors—was published by Centipede Press.

A handbook on writing, Yours to Tell: Dialogues on the Art and Practice of Fiction, written with his late wife Melanie, appeared in 2017 from Apex Books.



HE'D BEEN ALONE FOR ALMOST TEN YEARS. IT FELT A great deal longer. He'd almost forgotten what it had been like living with his wife, all the small kindnesses she had done for him which had made him feel like a member of the human race. But now that she'd been gone a decade it was easy to think of that period as a very lucky dream he once had, from which he would wake up filled with optimism, until he remembered that it had in fact been only a dream.

Now he spent his time in solitary activity or, when necessary, in a series of actions meant to limit human contact. It was unfortunate that he had to waste his energy with this. Active avoidance meant ignoring, or turning away as quickly as possible, the random people who came to his door. It meant spending too much time studying his caller identification display to determine whether he should answer the phone or not. It meant for the most part avoiding all forms of social media, even though he used his computer as his chief source of information on current events and societal trends. The nation was entering the end of an election cycle, a risky time both for the country and his notions of well-being.

Mister Ainsley had no more interest in politics than he did in religion. The results were always based on wishes and lies, it seemed. Political questions were rarely resolved, and became an excuse for an endless recycling of grudges. His rare peeks into social media to take the temperature of the culture revealed a cesspool of inconsequential resentments and confusion. People could be so dismissive, so cruel to one another. They clung to their fleeting hatreds as if their lives depended on them. He supposed this was inevitable: the true consequences of actions rarely revealed themselves during a single person's lifetime. Human beings, by nature, lacked perspective.

He had sympathy for the outsiders in such a system, whether due to gender, or race, or some combination of traits that shoved them outside the parameters of the favored class. He, too, was an outsider. But he had no desire to participate.

The current autumn had been more depressing than usual. The trees were apparently reluctant to compensate with their customary colorful display, with more grays and dying browns and surrendering blacks than he could remember from previous seasons. Several early snows had suffocated any struggling green, melting only for the annoying scatter of campaigners for the various contenders and causes stopping by his home several times daily: ringing his bell, beating his door, interrupting his thoughts concerning more enduring dilemmas.

If ensconced in his too-hot study he could ignore them until they went away. If passing through the house on a quest for tea or to relieve a buildup of agitation he might stop and answer the door.

This young man wore a cinnamon-colored sweater vest festooned with buttons and ribbons signifying a variety of positions and proposals. He was also very pale and had red hair and freckles. Mister Ainsley could not remember the last time he had talked to someone with red hair and freckles. Intrigued, he stood and listened, even though the glare of sun, and this young man's scarlet mane, hurt his eyes.

"I won't take up much of your time, sir. Are you a registered voter?" Mister Ainsley was not and never had been, but he must have nodded distractedly, because the young man continued. "I just wanted to know if you'd heard the good news about . . ."

After a moment's confusion—was this a religious spiel or a political one?—Mister Ainsley allowed the words to pass around him, the repetition of key adjectives occasionally stirring his ragged sideburns or the hair dangling over his collar. It had been awhile since he'd been out for a haircut, but he couldn't decide if he could still tolerate a human being's nervous fingers on his scalp. He made an effort to focus on the pale boy's watery eyes, the soft lines of the face wobbling and losing definition, the freckles beginning to wander off the skin. Before Mister Ainsley could react appropriately the young man had fainted part way into his entrance hall. Not sure what to do now, a stranger having entered his home for the first

time in years, he dragged the figure the rest of the way in and shut the door. He slapped the lock lever into place with belated anger.

He did not think of himself as particularly strong, but his muscles had rarely been tested. He felt uncomfortable leaving this earnest young man lying on the floor. He stooped and grabbed him beneath the armpits and lifted. Mister Ainsley could feel some irregularities in his pelvic region as he began to move with his burden, some gravitational shifts as his spine attempted to alter its alignment in response to the unaccustomed stress. He considered it fortunate that the young man was unconscious and unable to witness as Mister Ainsley, by means of a few dozen backwards waddling steps, got first the fellow's shoulders and buttocks, then his feet, up on the couch. He examined the shoes now propped up on the antique cushion—his guest had stepped in something creamy and fibrous and unidentifiable. Mister Ainsley pulled a rag from his coat pocket and used that to remove the shoes.

The campaign worker was very still, but not dead. Mister Ainsley stared at the freckled face, almost expecting those freckles to shift position, to take up residence in another region of the young man's face, but they did not. He could see the shallow rise of the chest, the intermittent flare of nostrils, sometimes accompanied by a sudden, deeper inhalation, as if the young man were smelling something. Of course. It had been so long since he had entertained visitors he had forgotten how certain scents affected people. He had a spray he could use. It wasn't particularly effective, but it might do.

He glanced around the room looking for elements that might disturb. He could only guess, of course: although he tried to keep up with trends in sensitivities, it was difficult to decide what might be deemed unacceptable when he himself accepted it on a daily basis very well. Was it the specimens? Taxidermy was a great deal less popular than it once had been, but it wasn't unheard of. The gray glops of half-digested paper? He retrieved a trash bag from the closet and scraped up the more obvious bits.

As an afterthought he grabbed any potentially tryphobic-inducing objects—of which he had quite a few—and hid them. In deference to his late wife he'd never displayed them, but since her passing they'd naturally crept into his furnishings and decoration, along with certain long-standing

biological stress relievers. He'd always found a wide variety of hole patterns to be soothing.

The young man stirred, groaned. He would have to wrap things up, but he hated being rushed. No doubt this young man's world was a world of rushing, but Mister Ainsley was physiologically incapable of this trending pace. He went into the kitchen and grabbed the spray, a gray liquid in a clouded plastic bottle. He misted some into the air around the living room as he moved, finally stopping over the couch and spraying an extra amount there. The young man's freckles looked darker, like tiny insects or flecks of dirt. Mister Ainsley resisted the urge to reach out and touch them. Going back into the kitchen, he spritzed a copious amount onto his own chest and into his hair before returning the bottle to its hiding place.

"Hello?" The voice sounded both groggy and panicked. He returned to the living room just as his guest was sitting up, shaking his head. "How . . . how did I get here?"

"You fainted, I'm afraid. Have you eaten today? Or perhaps you're exhausted from the day's labors. When was the last time you slept?"

"I—" The young man's mouth hung open, languid and wet. Mister Ainsley paused a moment and stared.

"In my observation politicians, preachers—notice how the lips come together in those words, as if the mouth wants to push them away—they take advantage of young people. You are their source of free labor. For the cause, they say. Causing irreparable harm, I suspect."

The young man stared at Mister Ainsley as if too exhausted to blink. But the blood was easing back into his face, flushing the paleness from his neck and ears. "I smelled something." He raised his chin, but instead of sniffing the air he awkwardly stuck out his tongue. "Tasted it, too. But I don't *now*. I'm sorry, but it was *awful*, I think. I can't really remember what it was like, but I know it was awful, and then everything was gone."

"So terrible it was for you, you left the world. Is that what you're saying?"

The young man finally blinked. "I'm sorry. I don't want to be rude."

"Of course not. But when something in our environment goes awry, when we're introduced into the alien, a shutdown can sometimes occur. Purely involuntary. I sympathize. I would say you were fortunate. Some might sleep for days after such an encounter. Some might even die."

The poor fellow shook his head in response. “Wait, wait. What are you saying to me? Just please stop, until I catch up. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I just can’t quite catch up.” He tried to stand, and immediately sat down again.

“Take your time—you’ve had a bit of a shock,” Mister Ainsley said. He genuinely understood how the young man felt. After all, hadn’t he been there himself? A fish out of water? Yes—that was the expression, and so he said, “It’s the fish-out-of-water phenomenon. As if you might drown in my air. There’s no hurry about this. You can leave when it’s time, but not before. You mustn’t. I can’t let you. I—it wouldn’t be correct.”

“I have a lot of houses to get to today.”

“Your campaigning? Yes. I understand that you are quite dedicated to this nonsense. Sorry, I do not intentionally offend. But politics? All this spouting off about things they have no intention of fixing anyway? All this upset about some condition that will have changed in a few years, if not in a few months? Humanity lacks patience—that’s your *real* problem.”

“It’s—it’s *important*.” The young man looked around. “Like Wilson for governor. You’ve heard of him? He’ll *restore* things to what they once were. Surely someone like you, you must admire his . . . his conservatism.”

“You believe I am conservative?” Mister Ainsley took a step closer to the couch and the young man drew back, pressing himself into the cushions, looking pale again. “I do not even understand what you people mean by that word. Perhaps, perhaps, but I assure you I am capable of the most *radical* behavior.”

The campaign volunteer struggled for words, eventually making a surprising barking noise. It was a kind of self-defensive gesture, apparently, against Mister Ainsley’s approach. The young man opened his mouth and started again. “This house, the way you dress . . .” He looked around and stopped speaking, as if trying to reinterpret what he saw.

Mister Ainsley glanced down at his outfit. Like most days, he was wearing one of his deceased father-in-law’s old suits. He’d never met him, but his wife had kept a closet full of the dead man’s clothing. In all likelihood it was an old-fashioned look— perhaps even antique—but Mister Ainsley did not think in those terms. The suits kept him warm, which was better than the alternative. As he had aged he had grown

sensitive to the cold, as he had to heat, and to many common household chemicals.

The house was a collection of antiques: wall-to-wall bookshelves filled with fine old hardbacks, art works from the Victorian era, the occasional small-scale replica of some bit of classical sculpture. All that had been his wife's, accumulated over the decades of her spinsterhood. His contributions were the artifacts, the found objects (from beaches and trash heaps, midnight wanderings through the town) and the specimens—in jars, or mounted on boards using his primitive taxidermy skills, triggers for old memories and forgotten instincts.

The young man had managed to stand, and was desperately gripping the back of an old chair, but at least he wasn't teetering. He was looking at some of the portraits hung up on the wall behind the couch.

"Generations of Ainsleys," he told the lad. "Some of them quite important, I gather. My wife came from an extensive family."

The young man turned, closed his eyes, opened them again. He was frowning. "Your wife's family? Then you—"

"I took my wife's last name. I know it isn't customary. But we all do what we have to, and sometimes only one option is available."

"I knew a friend of a friend," the young man said. "He did that, but he was much younger. I think it was a political thing, a statement. But I've never heard of, well, someone from your generation . . ."

"My *generation*, yes. The word lacks precision, don't you think? I mean it's all so *relative*. Most of what you see here—anything of measurable value—belonged to my late wife. She had a large collection of books, a few of which I have learned to read, as I have learned to read newspapers, magazines, Internet text—although the many visual cues have helped me. My wife taught me a great deal—she once taught children. She was quite good at it, always generous with her time. I have learned a great deal in her house, although now I suppose it is technically my own—but I don't believe it will ever be fully mine."

"She sounds—you know, I really *must* be going—she sounds like a very fine lady."

"Oh, she was. Although underappreciated by your lot, certainly. It used to make me quite angry, in our early days together. I think you people thought she was quite plain, but then you are obsessed with appearances,

aren't you? To your own detriment, I'm afraid. You completely misread both the beauty and the danger."

"I think, I think . . ." The young man appeared to be determined, but he was "losing the thread," as people now were prone to say. Mister Ainsley liked the expression, but thought it a shade optimistic. After all, it assumed there was an identifiable thread to be lost. "I'm ready to go. I want to go now."

"Oh, but you cannot leave without first seeing the garden. You like gardens, don't you? She was so very proud of it, and I've managed to make some interesting additions of my own."

It took little effort to nudge the young man toward the back of the house and into the kitchen. He could barely stand, which made him no match for Mister Ainsley, even with his aging joints and increasingly confused architecture.

The poor fellow was staring into the sink. Mister Ainsley looked down in dismay—he had forgotten to clean that bit up.

Pieces of an animal's desiccated corpse lay spread across the cast iron surface. Fur and bone and spoiled flesh made a kind of goulash whose original form Mister Ainsley could no longer remember. Worse, teetering on the lip of the sink was a fork with dark pieces of the animal's meat still speared on the tines.

"I do apologize for this," he said. "I tend to be an impulsive eater. I can never predict what might taste good, so dining has become a trial-and-error affair, I'm afraid."

The young fellow's eyes darted. His cheeks appeared polished to a high sheen. The freckles were like a mottled pattern buried under a warm, transparent shellac, providing a bit of tasty texture to the tender skin. Mister Ainsley looked away in embarrassment and pushed the young man out the back door before he could respond. The setting sun was still bright, but the tall plants tended to filter it.

"It is an impressive sight, if you will forgive the braggadocio. Glorious colors and smells, do you agree? My wife was very proud. I always thought it a tragedy that a woman with such a keen interest in gardening should suffer from congenital anosmia. My poor dear was born with no sense of smell at all. Of course, if she hadn't, I'm not sure our relationship would have been possible, much less last as long as it did."

The young man stared at him, then struggled to turn around, reaching for the door. Mister Ainsley batted the hands away and turned his guest back around. “No, no. None of that. Enjoy the garden, if you will. Drink in the day. Just let me show you what you are missing.”

Mister Ainsley proceeded to guide the young man around the garden, nudging him along step by step like a reluctant bride. Many of the plants had broad, enormous leaves and were far taller than the norm. They had a fleshiness, a substantiality, that he found reassuring. “For years my wife dumped my bath water out here—can you imagine? She was quite ecologically minded— she hated the wastefulness she saw everywhere. Initially I had no interest in the garden—I had little interest in anything, really— but then it began to remind me of all that I had forgotten.”

There was a slight rise in the ground near the back fence. Mister Ainsley took his guest to the top of this subtle elevation and pointed. “You can see the beach from here most days, and some suggestion of the ocean beyond. That was where she found me, washed up into that debris-embellished sand, barely breathing, my flesh shredded, the trip having worn my memories almost to nothing. She was a small woman, but determined. She dragged me through that field and up that incline there. She had a history of collecting things, but I believe I was her greatest prize.”

Mister Ainsley continued the tour, although it seemed his guest had lost interest. He pushed him around and around that yard, with each revolution featuring some new thing—something bloomed, something turned to display a new angle, something receded, something shyly brought forward. Eventually they came to that specimen whose extent was now the farthest, and the most spectacular. It was tall and pale, and the main portion of its body was shaped like a gigantic rounded star fruit (which supposedly Mister Ainsley had only seen in photographs, but he believed this was not the full truth of it). Its legs were like the cabriole legs on classical Greek and Chinese furniture, serving more like a stand for its body’s support, since that wasn’t its primary method of locomotion. For it had wings as well, enormous, transparent, fan-shaped combs on several sides, their surfaces wrinkled like cabbage leaves. And the head of this flower—if it could have been described as a flower—were stamen topped with these eye-shaped structures. The slits along its sides were reminiscent

of gills, but they were looser, and filled with what appeared to be eggs. Its aroma, its atmosphere, was all-inclusive.

“That—that’s a *plant*?”

Mister Ainsley turned to the young man in surprise, because he hadn’t really expected to hear from him ever again. “I actually don’t know. I’ve always thought of it as a kind of reminder of a life I once had—of a life that perhaps no longer exists.”

His guest tried to run, but he obviously suffered from diminished capacity. After a few steps he fell to the ground, and Mister Ainsley bent over him to apologize.

Those freckles proved impossible to resist. It was all genetics, really. Mister Ainsley couldn’t help himself—his manners had always been instinctual.

Safety

JASON V BROCK

Jason V Brock is an award-winning writer, editor, scholar, filmmaker, and artist whose work has been widely published in a variety of media (Weird Fiction Review print, S. T. Joshi's Black Wings series, Fangoria, and others). He describes his work as Dark Magical Realism. He is also the founder of a website and digest called [NameL3ss]; his books include A Darke Phantastique, Disorders of Magnitude, and Simulacrum and Other Possible Realities. He has compiled the documentary films Charles Beaumont: The Life of Twilight Zone's Magic Man, The AckerMonster Chronicles!, and Image, Reflection, Shadow: Artists of the Fantastic.

*“Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a
damn.”*

—GORE VIDAL

1



THE PRIVATE HELICOPTER'S BLADES SLOWLY WOUND to stillness as the powerful whine of the Pratt & Whitney Canada PW210S engines faded into the approaching twilight.

In the distance, the glowing nightscape of Dubai slowly revealed itself as the sun slipped below the horizon, dragging the last ochre flames of another day behind it. The muted azure of nightfall gradually cloaked the sprawling city and the lifeless desert beyond in a velvety prelude to the impending brilliance soon to be displayed by the unfolding canopy of the Milky Way. Fading into view through the scrim of darkness that now blurred the line between the inky nighttime depths of the Persian Gulf and the boundless void of outer space, the massive skyscrapers of Dubai's spiky skyline sparkled and shimmered like jewels cleaved from multi-hued gems as wisps of fog began to roll in off the evening sea, swallowing the gently lapping surf of the pristine coastline and hazing the traffic streams and homes hundreds of feet below the massive hotel Burj al-Arab tower in impressionistic smears of colored mist.

Near the scaffolding that connected the helipad to the roof of the Burj al-Arab, a saffron-colored windsock fluttered stiffly in the cool winds coming off the darkened Gulf. Once the rotors had been secured by the ground crew, a member of the hotel's concierge walked up to the aircraft, his monstrous shadow looming over the luxurious four-seat executive Sikorsky S-76D as he strode past the flood lights that illuminated the landing area; the other three members of the greeting party— one holding a large bouquet of roses and other flowers, another a serving tray with two flutes of champagne, the last cradling a 24-carat gold-and-diamond encrusted iPad—waited stoically. The bespectacled man, who appeared to be in his late fifties, was stocky, dark-skinned, and attired in a sharply

tailored charcoal-gray Armani suit; a black halo of curly hair, gently ruffled by the nocturnal breezes, ringed his high forehead. Opening the door to the passenger cabin, the hotelier lowered the retractable boarding steps and smiled faintly at the couple inside; through the window in the cabin divider, the pilot, a young Asian woman, nodded her acknowledgment from the cockpit before returning to her paperwork.

Welcoming them with warm formality in a rounded British accent, he said, “Good evening, Lord Vanderbulle and Ms. Lyghes! Most welcome to Burj al-Arab. Please watch your step as you exit. I am called Om, and I shall be assisting you this night.”

2



AS ANASTASIA STARED OUT ACROSS THE MESMERIZING panorama of Dubai from the huge windows of the gigantic two-bedroom Royal Suite, she was stunned by the stark beauty of the clear desert night; pulling the collars of the hotel robe close around her neck, she felt relaxed, sedate. The rough terrycloth felt good against her nude body. Nearly five hundred feet below and several miles distant from the man-made island that the hotel was situated on, she could just make out the busy activities of people as they went about their nightly business in one of the most exclusive places in the world.

Focusing momentarily on the sight of the massive bedroom reflected in the window glass, she noted that he was still in the four-pillared soaking tub. Closing her eyes, she relished the mysterious aromas of myrrh, sweet vanilla, and sharp frankincense wafting from the dining area as the sound of his splashes and quiet singing reverberated from the huge marble, glass, and hand-decorated tile lavatory. Opening her eyes again, she returned her gaze to the window, marveling anew at the ornate and lavish furnishings of the room, reversed in the dim reflection: multiple bright red and richly black throw pillows adorning a large divan and an accompanying chaise longue, both upholstered in embroidered beige silk and emeralds; black marble end tables with solid gold lamps highlighted in platinum and studded with blood-red rubies. The magnificent chamber itself—its thirty-foot ceiling and walls softly lit and decorated in yellow, pink, and orange

hues accented with 24-carat gold trim—was anchored by the king-size, rotating canopy bed, above which was suspended an enormous round beveled mirror. She smiled in remembrance of the love they had recently made as her gaze played over the thickly knotted red and gold bed sheets.

Beyond the city, her attention was abruptly drawn to distant flashes of lightning on the dark horizon, pulling her out of this waking reverie. He appeared from the bathroom, dressed in a robe, scrubbing a thick towel over his still-damp hair. He smiled slightly at her as he blotted his face dry.

“Nothing like the water here, did you notice? Feels fantastic after a hot day of sightseeing,” he said.

She turned to face him, her hands in the pockets of her wrap. “I agree. And . . . this *place*! My god, I’ve never seen anything like it!”

He laughed, draping the towel around his shoulders. “I come here every year during the Festival. My accountant says I may as well enjoy myself while I burn through some of the cash. Can’t say I disagree. What’s twelve thousand dollars a night if you can swing it? Last year I stayed for the whole month of January—”

She arched her eyebrow. “All by yourself? In this . . . *mansion* on the Persian Gulf?”

He reddened faintly. “Ha! Well, I suppose we don’t need to get into that too much, come to think of it. Let’s say I had a few friends over from time to time.”

She arched her other brow, nodding her head in silent comprehension. “I *see*. Well, that was then, as they say.”

He walked over to the bar and poured himself a Scotch, two fingers, neat: “Yes—and this is *now*. You want anything?”

“Sure, why not? I’ll have what you’re having.”

He poured her drink; bringing it over, they stared out at the cityscape. The storm was getting closer. After a few more moments of contemplation, she announced that she was going to ready herself for dinner.

“Excellent,” he replied, checking his Patek Philippe as she retired to the lavatory. “Our reservations at Al Muntaha are in half an hour.”

3



“O TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOURSELF,” SHE SAID, gently swirling her glass of Pinot Noir and inhaling the aroma before taking a sip. The piano player performed a gentle rendition of “Killing Me Softly” in the background. “For starters, is that your *real* name?”

He smiled, his eyes catching the gleam from the ambient lighting of the tabletop candles. He leaned back in his chair, smoothing his tie after unbuttoning his suitcoat. “It is, actually. My brother’s name is Scotty; he’s a reverend in California by way of New Mexico. Has a couple bad marriages behind him, as most of us do. Sort of went crackers a few years ago. We’re originally from Alaska, and the remnants of our family are mostly back there. I have a few cousins in Florida, too. I suppose we tend to gravitate toward extremes.”

She crossed her arms, squeezing her cleavage together and letting it spill out of the low-cut black dress as she leaned forward on the table, a mischievous grin bowing her scarlet lips. “*Really?* So Lord is really your first name? I guess I can say I’ve bedded a Lord now.” She giggled.

He took a crust of bread from the basket on the table, spreading a pat of butter on it while mighty Dubai glimmered through the windows, providing a dazzling backdrop as lightning from the slow-moving storm flickered behind it.

“Well, I guess you can,” he said, laughing while he reached for his wine glass.

“I always figured it was a pseudonym,” she continued. “I *loved* your last book, by the way. I was so . . . *disturbed* by it. Very well written.”

“Well, I appreciate that. Writing isn’t easy. It’s a lonely profession. Especially so-called weird fiction. There are very few who can make a living doing the type of writing that I do. Even the masters of the craft struggled with that.”

“Mmmm. I understand. Though I do like quite a few of your contemporaries, I’ll admit.”

Vanderbulle’s jaw tensed. He tilted his head. “Oh? Such as?”

Anastasia took a piece of bread and buttered it, absentmindedly pursing her lips in thought. “That Jack M. Antatas is intriguing. A bit hard to follow at times, as he seems too taken with imitating Hunter S. Thompson. I follow him on Twitter—he’s funny!—but his work gets kind of stale after a whole book of it. I prefer less on-the-nose writers, like that Horace Z.

Rubble, Esq. Now *he* is something! I also like a lot of the micro-presses from Canada and the West Coast. I'm a *real* sucker for the Odd Nouveau and New Weird, especially. I've even friended a few of the writers on Facebook."

Vanderbulle shifted in his seat, swishing his wine as he listened. "Anyone else you like to read?"

"Really, anybody in *The Year's Greatest Horror Tales* series. It's an aesthetic that I . . . get, y'know? It's *modern*. Atmospheric, a lot of it, not so focused on plot, or hung up on cultural stereotypes promoted by straight, cisgendered old white guys. I mean, haven't we heard *enough* from those people? They're what's *wrong* with society, I believe. I want to experience stories from *the other*—people of color, QUILTBAG/LGBTQ, female authors, non-Christians. Women and Gender Studies was a focus of mine when I attended Smith College."

Vanderbulle nodded. "I've actually never been in that series, *Year's Greatest*. When I dip into them, it seems like a lot of the same writers appear over and over. Sort of narrows the field over time. Thinking about it, I guess a key difference in my work and theirs is that I strive for realism—my stuff is *real*. I *know* what I'm writing about, where they're just playing around. Also, I have something to *say*. A message. Several, to be honest. That's quite lacking in their works for the most part. I think people get that, which is why my books sell so well. Readers can sense the difference—the weight, the energy. Theirs tends to be kind of inward, niche, limited. Ponderous, even." He paused, rubbing his forehead. "Granted, I stopped writing short fiction some time ago. You don't get rich writing poetry and short stories. Novels are the way to go. And options, of course."

"Options?"

"For film rights and so on. That's where I made my fortune—all the movies. I don't like most of them. I mean, how can you film the types of things I write? But they keep throwing cash at me, so I figure why not take it? Do that enough, and you become *very* wealthy . . . and the films they *have* made, Jesus! I tell everyone who asks in interviews that I don't care what they do with the movies and videogames anymore, 'cause at the end of the day I still have my books on the shelf—they're my true legacy."

"Interesting. Do you read the people I'm talking about?" She drained her glass and refilled it.

“Read them? Not so much. I’ve read enough, I suppose. A few of them are talented, certainly on a line-by-line basis. Even conceptually. Others are simply *terrible* writers. I’m not a pastiche guy, or trying to ride a trend. I’m working toward something else, something they cannot even *begin* to comprehend, not really. Most of these folks don’t have that kind of ambition, not from what I’ve read. And not very much of their work is appealing to the masses, which is something that I aim for. I know many of the bigger fish in the pond personally, mainly from the old days when I was starting out. Cons, film festivals, that sort of thing. I quit going to those a few years ago once my weird trilogy broke through. After I sold seventy million books, it became hard even to walk the dog in my own neighborhood. That’s when I moved to my Calabasas compound, just to have a bit more privacy.”

He took another drink of the Pinot before continuing. “Once people began shoving books under the stalls in restrooms for me to sign at events and following me to my hotel room as if I was Stephen King the Second, I stopped having fun. And everyone suddenly . . . *wanted* something from me, especially those who were also in the trenches back in the day; several of that lot had stepped on me on their way ‘up.’ After I hit, though, there was much ass-kissing on their part, which was normally reserved for well-known editors. And, interestingly, they somehow managed to recall many ‘good ole days’ that I didn’t personally want to revisit, for the reasons stated. Suffice it to say there were more than a few instances of the folks you’ve noted acting as little more than boorish, smarmy glad-handers once I was in demand.”

“Well, you could just rise above all that, right?” she asked.

“Easy to say, harder to practice when you’re getting smeared and ganged up on everywhere you turn. I guess they figured I’d just overlook the nasty comments made behind my back, or the snotty way they had treated me and my family. It contributed to the breakup of my marriage, even. And they insisted on making *everything* political. It wasn’t anything I wanted to be party to, I finally decided, figuring their behavior had to be rooted in some deranged jealousy or envy. After all, none of them had anything that I needed; I just wanted to do my thing. And now I do. As they say, living well is the best revenge, no? So I was burned early on, and then chose to divest myself of these slime molds rather than be manipulated by less

talented rivals who were hell-bent on a careerist path doomed to failure; then, success. Now I ignore them; of course, they still want to exploit my name and hard-won status in the field to their advantage. Can't blame them, I reckon." He took another taste of wine. "Combine that stuff with the normal pitfalls of sudden widespread celebrity—death threats, stalking, harassment from the overzealous, you name it—and it gets to the point that you have to ruthlessly excise people from your life. You just have to scrape them off and never look back." He paused, thoughtfully considering his glass of Pinot Noir. "All that said, though, I'm not *completely* averse to attending cons in the future. Some of them—World Nightmare Convention leaps to mind—are great for professional networking and socializing. My agent, Charly Weinhouse, gets after me about not attending, and I feel a bit guilty sometimes, as they're the only chance I get to catch up with old friends like Straub, Tem, Jones, Etchison, Shirley, or Tibbetts." Vanderbulle paused again, reflective.

"Signings for my new books—like the one where we met—are still fun, though. And I'm a lifetime member of TAN, the Terror Authors Network, so I vote for the Karloffs every year. But there's a saying I'm reminded of by the way these people act: 'It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail.' I believe Gore Vidal said that. Pretty insightful, really. I think of it when I read pieces online or on social media—*antisocial* media, I call it—and it makes me *glad* I don't support some of the more . . . esoteric notions that some of the attendees have."

"You mean like changing the Dark Phantasy Awards statuette from a rendering of Roald Dahl to something more defining of global fantasy literature? He *was* a terrible human being, after all—"

"Indeed. He had some rather unpleasant aspects . . ."

"I mean, there was a whole Twitter campaign pointing out his anti-Semitism and his support of Hitler by the Jewish YA author Danny Ben-Aharon. I read some blogs that really put it all together. . . . Even the *Times* was scathing. Do you really think it's acceptable that people feel they have to turn the bust around to avoid looking at it when they have it in their home? Or that they are humiliated accepting it, knowing how . . . *evil* Dahl was?" She sat up straighter, folding her arms defensively.

Vanderbulle ran a hand through his hair. "Well, no, but there are options. They can decline the nomination, or turn the award down, for

example. Even return it, if it's too burdensome to them personally. After all, Dahl was chosen to represent the award because of his *imagination*, not his politics. Besides, he was wrong. And he's dead! I mean, he wasn't a Nazi, nor was he an activist. He simply had a blind spot. Things were different then—not to excuse him, he was clearly in the wrong, but just to reframe his beliefs in another context.”

“Hmm. And how do you feel about H. P. Lovecraft?”

The waiter arrived with the first course—a succulently umami-scented mushroom risotto—and replenished their wine glasses. Outside, the lightning storm was growing in intensity as rain sheeted over Dubai; raindrops gathered on the great windows of the restaurant, kaleidoscoping the lights of the city below.

“They say you eat with the eyes first, and this looks divine, I must say. . . . However, to answer your question, I do love the old stuff, such as Charles Baudelaire, Lovecraft, Robert Aickman, William Hope Hodgson —”

“No women? No people of color?”

“Well, sure. I really love the work of Sylvia Plath, Mary Shelley, Shirley Jackson . . . Richard Wright and Langston Hughes are phenomenal, too. James Baldwin, Samuel R. Delaney. William S. Burroughs, Charles Beaumont, Ray Bradbury. . . . I mean, there are many excellent writers, and I'm not sure how social-identity politicking the field to death serves any useful purpose—”

“Back to the old white men, I see. And *how* can you defend Lovecraft? He was a racist!” She stabbed into the risotto.

“I'm not defending that; I said I liked his work. That was a long time ago anyway. Times change—”

“The man-of-his-time argument, eh? I thought you were smarter than that.” She narrowed her eyes. The clinking of glasses and the murmur of other diners filled the silence between them. He took a swallow of wine. The piano player began another song.

“Look, I think you just don't understand all the issues here.” He raised his hand to counter the protest she was beginning. “Please, just hear me out for a moment. Please.” She shrugged and fell back into her chair, arms crossed.

“I get where you’re coming from, honestly,” he began. “But you need to understand the—the *context* of some of these things. You and I are from different generations, though we’re not that far apart in age. And the plain fact of the matter is, some of these protestations are simply grandstanding, it looks to me. I note that the vast majority of the people who rage about these issues with certain writers are themselves usually middle-aged white males from very ‘white’ places—the suburban Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, New England, Canada. On the one hand, they seem determined to undermine the legacy of Lovecraft, yet—strangely!—they appear to be riding his recent wave of popularity and cachet. I admit to finding that more than a bit hypocritical—it causes me to doubt their sincerity. It feels as if they either have a certain disdain for their audience, deep-seated insecurities, or a form of ‘white liberal guilt’ to complain so loudly. I note that most people who act this way are themselves often closeted racists, and are overcompensating. In other words, they’re poseurs suffering from what I deem to be ‘slightly-above-average syndrome’ snobbery and virtue signaling white privilege.” He let this sink in. She stared out the window. “Now I understand taking umbrage with Lovecraft’s personal stances—I find them repugnant and deplorable myself in several cases—but the fact is, that was *nearly one hundred years ago*. And, as I noted regarding Dahl, HPL was *dead wrong* about his racist and anti-Semitic views. Additionally, he himself *is dead*.”

“Plenty of other artists, politicians, musicians, and filmmakers are problematic by modern standards, too, but sticking just with authors, what of Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, or Jack London? I suspect it’s because HPL is in vogue at the moment. Add to the mix that he was never an activist, that he was gentlemanly, and died relatively young, meaning he never lived to see such horrid things as the Holocaust or the Jim Crow South as it became. . . . The intensity and dread in his best work were likely *fed* by his prejudices, actually, by his apparent xenophobia. And he was married to a Jewish woman, Sonia Greene, don’t forget. His flawed personal thoughts, which he never really expressed as an adult except in private correspondence, shouldn’t be held against the man. I say that as a liberal. That’s why I think we can’t just condemn him with our presentism, or the existing cultural climate. That’s pretty reactionary, I think. We have to try and have compassion, to attempt understanding of people who share

differing perspectives, even if they're hurtful or offensive to us; there might be some offset to them. Perhaps a way to bring them to our way of thinking. It's really the only way we can root out such hatred in the end: by hearing the arguments out and dismantling them. By understanding the 'nature of the enemy,' as it were—"

Anastasia shook her head in disbelief. "So you're a white supremacist? Lovecraft does attract that element. An apologist. Wow—I am *totally* shocked. We shouldn't be hearing people like you out; we should be shutting them down! There's no reason to give people who believe what you do a platform."

He sighed, then took a few bites of his risotto. The warm sound of the piano floated through the room like a distant memory. "No, I am most certainly *not* a racist, for Pete's sake. So by your estimation, we should consign the 'old white guys,' as you put it, to the dustbin of history, even if they have something to offer?"

She raised the glass to her lips, smirking. "They've had *plenty* of time to say their piece, Lord, O 'Viscount of the Weird.'"

He glared at her, letting his fork clink noisily into the bowl. "Look—that's marketing stuff; I have *never* claimed such a mantle."

Anastasia laughed. "Hit a nerve, did I?" She poured another glass of wine for herself.

The waiter reappeared, whisking their plates away and setting the entrée course on the table. He was having a roast duck confit with greens on the side. She had chosen the veal.

She continued: "Well, now I know."

He began cutting his dinner into pieces. "'Know' what? That I'm being honest with you? That we disagree? What?"

"I know that—"

"Listen to me, young lady," he said, pointing the knife at her as he spoke, his eyes blazing. "You don't 'know' anything. You think you have it all figured out, don't you? Well, I've got news for you: you have a *lot* to learn. So do your little social-climbing buddies online. I am amazed you can lob these baseless allegations at *me*, yet excuse the covert misogyny and sexism in their stories, or their ableist and classist screeds which mistake mockery and oversimplified characterizations for 'insightful satire' or 'literary greatness.' And what of their abuse of social-identity politics so

white people like them can then parade around as though stealing that flag provides some ‘cloak of invincibility’ that makes them superior to everyone else—including those doing the real work of protesting social injustice in the street, or working to feed the homeless, or fighting to change the law so that it benefits everyone? Fine. You can have their thin characters, weak dialogue, and pretentious writing, which—frequently—strikes the same yawn-inducing note of quasi-philosophical pseudo-intellectualism. Lest we forget the overuse of certain techniques: the embarrassing in-jokes, too much punctuation ‘artfully’ laid out on the page, or some other painfully self-conscious gimmick, like eschewing quotation marks in favor of dashes in the name of an effete, clumsy homage to their literary heroes. And the ‘reviews’ they garner in the digital realm—the innumerable fake five-star accolades and swooning commentary by their friends acting in concert to create a false impression of ‘importance,’ when even the most casual of readers can see that they have nothing to say, no vision. And how about the tokenist panderings in these empty, poorly edited scribbles by this cast of wannabes and hangers-on? Christ, print-on-demand is becoming the bane of good literature, I think, with its lack of editorial oversight and its low bar to entry. Yeah, I’ve read your ‘friends’; don’t look so fucking surprised.”

He returned to his meal, placing a morsel in his mouth. She hid her hands under the table, staring down into her plate.

“And something else,” he said, taking another swallow of wine. “There *are* people of color who enjoy the work of Lovecraft. You act as though they don’t exist! You all look down your noses at the rest of us who ‘just don’t get it,’ and explain to everyone—even the people of color you allegedly care so much about!—that you ‘understand’ the plight of minorities somehow better than the rest of us. How? From taking a few classes in college? What? You had relatives who lived in Cabrini-Green? Were you raised as an itinerant farmworker? Lived on a reservation, did you? I don’t know . . . You told me that your mother’s side was Greek and Irish and that your father’s family was English all the way back to the *Mayflower*, that you had a trust fund that allowed you to slum as you saw fit, collecting tattoos and ‘life experiences.’ Think I forgot all that? You people *also* seem to forget that one of Lovecraft’s chief biographers is from India. Joshi has no issue

with HPL, other than finding some of his beliefs wrongheaded and appalling. Doesn't *that* count for something?"

Anastasia slumped further into her seat. "No, he doesn't count. He's an apologist. And he subscribes to theories by Harold Bloom and his notions about the literary canon. He's an ass. Everybody thinks so. Just look it up on Facebook and you'll see."

He laughed. "Oh, that's rich! Truly. So his ideas *erase* his ethnicity, just because you don't agree with the guy? I may not like every conclusion he suggests, but I happen to think he's onto something by siding with some of Bloom's critiques, actually. *Especially* Bloom's insights with respect to the 'anxiety of influence' and the 'School of Resentment.' Seems sometimes like the *entire* weird field is suffering from these things on some level, at least the ones hailing from the sad little outpost I refer to as 'New Weirdestan.' It's not art, I'll say that much; it's nothing, in fact. To encapsulate it: there's no sublimity, only ridiculousness. Frankly, this whole discussion is ruining my appetite and messing up my evening."

They passed a few moments without speaking while Vanderbulte finished his meal. Outside, the storm had settled over the city. She looked at the food on her plate, then to the window. The piano drifted back to them, the tune a version of "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered."

After several more minutes, he poured them more wine and said: "Look, Anastasia, I think we should reboot this. If I hurt your feelings, I apologize. I was upset and let my emotions get the better of me. Let's enjoy our meal here and try to salvage the evening. We still have the Festival to look forward to. Enjoy your dinner, please. The chef here, Damon Hercules, is a multiple James Beard Award winner. He's better than Gordon Ramsay, Anthony Bourdain, and any other celebrity chef you've ever heard of. I know, because they've all cooked for me. Hell, Tom Colicchio is a personal friend of mine, and I think Damon is better! The food here is a transformative experience, which is why I brought you for the Festival. There's nothing else like it on earth, that I can promise. The waiting list at Festival time is *years* long— even heads of state like the President and First Lady can't be accommodated. But I'm an unusual case; due to what I mean to the Festival, they seat me no matter what. And understand—I only bring people who are very special here. Even though we've only known each other a few weeks, I have a feeling about you. You're just the thing I

need for the Festival.” He reached over and stroked a tress of dark hair from her face. She looked at him, her eyes shining, her features softening.

“Well, I *am* hungry. And this other stuff . . . we can work it out later, I guess.” She relaxed, untensing her arms. She began to eat.

He leaned back in his seat, watching her as she ate.

“That’s right. We’re not really that far apart, I promise. We have our goals, we have our tactics,” he said, smiling at her. “In time we’ll sort out a strategy. To you, a woman of substance and radiance.” He held his glass aloft.

She blushed, gently touching her glass to his. “Wow. To think I was upset just a few moments ago. Thank you, Lord.”

4



AFTER THE MEAL, THEY ENJOYED ANOTHER BOTTLE of red. The restaurant had closed and they were the only two left in the unlit dining room. Outside, the storm had abated, and the city of Dubai gleamed in the moonless dark. Retiring to a window-front table after finishing the fine Syrah, they were rewarded with a commanding view of the desert world.

After a time, the waiter brought two flaming glasses of white Sambuca. Smothering the flames, he bid them good evening.

“You see,” Vanderbulle said, “the fire burns off some of the intensity of the alcohol. And the three things floating in there are coffee beans, which represent the Holy Trinity. They also add to the flavor, of course. *Salute!*” He raised his glass. They were awaiting the final course of the evening, dessert, as they imbibed the digestif.

“So explain to me what the Festival is all about,” Anastasia said, her voice low, sultry.

He was somber, gazing at the city below, deep in thought. “Well, it’s a relatively new thing, actually. I brought the idea to the hotel a few years ago. It’s a very special . . . ritual, I guess you could say. It only happens once a year, for a single evening, beginning at the stroke of midnight.”

“Ah. So this isn’t some local custom?”

He shook his head. “No, no. It was something that I used to fantasize about. A dream, I guess you could say. Once I finally had the means, I wanted to bring it to fruition. So this time of year during the New Moon, I like to come here and have the rarest foodstuff on the planet. I pick up the tab for the revelers— all folks I’ve selected for personal reasons to be here—and each one of the participants receives a gift from me. I consider it a way of personally rejuvenating my fortune and creativity for the coming year, a way of sharing my success with others.”

“That sounds amazing!” she exclaimed.

He smiled in the darkened restaurant, checking his watch. “Only a little while now. Drink up! It will be unforgettable, I have no doubt. Chef Damon doesn’t hop on trends like bushmeat or molecular gastronomy. He’s at once classic and iconoclastic. A genius of the palate. He uses only the finest, freshest, most extraordinary ingredients in the world, and prepares them with the skill of someone from another plane of existence. He’s so disciplined, so . . . meticulous. It’s really something to watch him work. The level of artistry, the technique he has— particularly for the preparation and execution of the Festival *pièce de résistance*—is *spectacular*. It’s really a once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing. And it’s kind of a dangerous meal to create, so he has to be quite cautious. It’s similar to *Fugu*, the Japanese pufferfish delicacy, or the Greenland shark dish *Hákarl*, only more lethal for the chef, potentially.”

She nodded, relaxing as they enjoyed their Sambuca. “Wow. Sounds pretty exotic! So what is this food?”

He smiled, still staring out the window. “That’s a great question. Well, the short answer is that it’s an aphrodisiac.” He glanced over at her, noting her expression, which was a mixture of surprise and intrigue.

“Well, that sounds . . . fascinating,” she said, sipping the anise-flavored liqueur once more.

“And the long answer—the long answer I’ll explain once we begin.”

5

IDNIGHT.





Anastasia was collapsed in the high-backed chair, dozing, the empty glass of Sambuca cradled in her hand. Vanderbulle looked at her, the lights of Dubai illuminating the scene.

"The time has arrived," he whispered. At that moment, a gong resonated throughout the cavernous dining room, startling her awake.

"Jesus! I-I must have fallen asleep. What time is it?" she asked, wiping her eyes in confusion.

"The time is nigh! Welcome to this year's Festival!"

Vanderbulle stood, offering his hand to her. She took it and they stepped down from the platform near the window.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she could see that there was a group of about fifteen people standing around a large table that was simply adorned with plates, flatware, lighted candles, and a white tablecloth. The weak flicker of candlelight was the sole illumination in the room; she could just make out that everyone around the table were dressed in dark hooded robes.

"Wow," she said, pulling closer to Vanderbulle. "This is sort of creepy."

He chuckled softly. "You'll understand everything better in a few moments. Please stand here next to me while I recite the invocation." They took a place at the head of the table.

"Welcome," he began, "to the Festival. I would like to present an unforgettable evening of debauchery, of revelations, of mania and degeneracy. Remember our axiom: 'You change the world, do not let the world change you.' Thank you all for coming. Let us begin. Om, please?"

With that, Om—the concierge staff member from the helipad—appeared from the darkness in the rear of the room, which had taken on the ominous aspect of a mausoleum rather than a restaurant in the world's most expensive hotel. In his hands was a serving tray holding a platter covered with a domed, silver lid. He placed the tray on the table in front of Vanderbulle and Anastasia.

"As the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw sagely observed, 'There is no sincerer love than the love of food.' To that end, the Burj al-Arab is most humbled and pleased to present Chef Damon's newest Festival masterwork, which he calls *Oscurità Vivente*. He bids you enjoy."

Om raised his hands high and loudly clapped three times. Everyone in robes unsashed and let them fall to the floor, their naked bodies lit by the

flickering candles. Starting with Om, the group of men and women began to emit a low sound, a humming tone that rose in volume.

"Now, it is your turn," Om prompted with a graceful flourish of his hand.

Anastasia felt faint. "I-I don't know—"

Vanderbulle removed his jacket, unknotted his tie, and untucked his shirt. "But you must, Anastasia. It's part of the Festival." He pulled his shirt off, stepped out of his shoes, then out of his pants. She was surprised to see his throbbing erection and closed her eyes for an instant, trying to process what was happening.

She opened her eyes, and the tuneless humming grew louder. "I-I'm not feeling well. I think I'll just go back to our room . . ."

"Om, please assist the young lady," Vanderbulle said, his eyes steely.

"My pleasure, sir." Om reached over and tore her dress off in a violent motion, and she was completely naked along with the others. Too startled to protest or cry, she just stood there in shock.

"Before we begin, let us feast to be in the proper mood," Vanderbulle said, and the humming stopped. Everyone sat down in unison.

"*Bon appétit*," Om said, removing the cover from the dish. He then bowed, saying nothing further. The little man turned, placed the dome on a cart behind him, and trundled from the room.

Illumined by the candles, Anastasia was disgusted to see the thing on the platter was still alive, apparently. The size of a large turkey, it looked to be a type of animal—or part of one, at least. The covering was a mucoid paste of transparent slime, beneath which was an oily black hide, iridescent and emitting a soft green and purple glow. Embedded in the skin in random places were what looked to be dark red eyes with slitted pupils, which searched back and forth in the dim light of the room. On one end, it appeared to have a grouping of pointed dentition that recurved inward to a dark hole; the other end was drier and had a puckered, scabby appearance, as though it had been severed from a larger organism and then cauterized.

"Have you actually *read* any Lovecraft, Anastasia?" Vanderbulle asked.

She shook her head slowly, her eyes fixed on the thing pulsing on the platter. "N-no. I refuse to because of his horrible views. As an aspiring writer, I want no undue influence on my own work, especially my weird fiction."

Vanderbulle smiled, nodding in reply. “I see. Well, in his great masterpiece, *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft mentions a race of beings that serve the Elder Things. He called them shoggoths. The Elder Things and the shoggoths are aliens that possess both animal and vegetable aspects, and—in the case of shoggoths—are mutable, capable of regeneration, and prolonged periods of deep, deep hibernation when exposed to sub-zero temperatures.”

She nodded as she listened, watching the noisy creature on the platter as it writhed and reshaped, becoming more active as he spoke. It began to huff audibly, propelling slime from the mouth end of itself.

“Well, good old HPL didn’t know about the true wilderness of Antarctica; he was doing the best he could with the limited knowledge he had at his disposal, after all. How could he have known that there really *were* creatures similar to what he imagined underneath the ancient ice sheets of the frozen South? In fact, there is a huge chain of mountains, even a massive lake, buried deep under the ice—the abiding ice. And, within that ice, as global warming has increased, things have risen to the surface.” He motioned to the platter. “Now this *isn’t* a shoggoth—those are from Mr. Lovecraft’s imagination, of course—but it is something otherworldly. I procured it from a Russian research facility several years ago. They need money, and I have a lot of it, so it all worked out. No, what we have here is a part of *something*—the rest is still languishing in a dreamless sleep in the underground freezer beneath the hotel.”

The thing on the table emitted a shrill, multi-timbred call.

“Ah, yes. Old Screech, as I call it! That’s the sound,” Vanderbulle noted. “To summarize: my scientist friends have declared whatever this is to be of extraterrestrial origin. In fact, the U.S. government has repeatedly issued threats for me to turn the beast over, which I have refused. I want to keep it my little Top Secret for just a while longer—just until I have consolidated a bit more *power*. And that is the purpose of the Festival: to gain wisdom, to grow my power.”

Vanderbulle stood, then picked up a knife from his place setting. He looked at her, cupping her chin in his hand. “I learned by experimenting that partaking of it—flesh of its flesh, as it were—engenders great wisdom, tremendous insight. Eating it creates a powerful, long-lasting sexual and hallucinatory effect on humans, and this is the source of my success—the

realism in my books has been *earned*. I've earned it through my consumption of the great beast. And, as in life, the dose makes the poison—some will pass on into another form from taking too much, and others of us will attain ever more cumulative power. But I control who gets how much, you see? So, in other words, I control the world—and I will *not* be yielding that power anytime soon.”

His lips turned up in a mirthless grin, his dead eyes reflecting the glowing candlelight. “And *you*, my dear Anastasia, are part of my plans this year.” With that, he plunged the blade into the thing on the table, which responded by jetting a luminous blue-green liquid onto his naked chest.

The rest of the group descended on the being, which fought with superhuman strength, tearing flesh, biting off appendages. A few of the participants fell by the table, dead from the fight, while others cut away and tore off chunks of the mewling creature, eagerly consuming them. The glowing blood of the beast showered the room like some Luminol-enhanced crime scene.

“And now, you . . .” Vanderbulle, covered in human and inhuman gore, said to her. As she protested and cried in revulsion, he presented a quivering, squirming tatter of the thing’s torn flesh in his fist and forced her to eat it, making sure she swallowed it completely.

A lustful, mad orgy ensued, the ultimate exhaustion of the revelers marking the Festival’s climax.

6



THE WOMAN'S NAKED BODY LAY EXPOSED IN THE desert for a long time: undiscovered by man, unperturbed by beast. She had the marks upon her body, upon her sleeping consciousness, and nothing would dare disturb her.

During the following months—as the sun and the stars traded places, and the ceaseless transit of the planets continued overhead—she quickly became desiccated, mummified by the uncaring heat and dryness of the desert. She had once been nothing and was now transmogrified again into a state of the same: all her yearnings, all her memories, all her knowledge had died with her on this barren plateau, and the things she may or may

not have learned in the final moments of her existence mattered not, and never would again.

Then, one day, when the rains returned, she swelled, reawakening into a new life, with a concomitant renewal of purpose: to serve, to satisfy. She had reached a state of supplication and had no desire to engage with her former self. Around her, others emerged from the sand dunes, stripped and branded in the same manner. They too had reached a point of satiety, and there was no longer a place for them in the living realm, in the world known as modern society. They were legion and destined now to serve only one—the man who would soon call them together; the man who would gather them from his station within the great structure in the sea; the man who had shown them the truth. Until then, they would position themselves and wait, no matter how long that might be.

Slouching toward Dubai, her afterlife—like the others before and ones destined to be—began as it had ended: blank, mindless, obscure.

Provenance Unknown

STEPHEN WOODWORTH

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RIN VANCE SAUNTERED INTO THE DARKENED warehouse in her red Dolce & Gabbana pantsuit, perfectly aware she was overdressed. When dealing with sharks like Aram, she strove to intimidate them as much as possible, never letting them forget *she* was the buyer.

A bald goon met her at the front door. His suit clung so close to the bodybuilder bulge of his chest that it outlined the lump of what was undoubtedly a concealed gun on his left side. He conducted her down an aisle between shelves of imports that walled them in on either side: contraband ivory carvings from Asia, looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria, “Old Master” paintings that were either stolen or forged or both. Erin did not sully her hands with such stuff—Christie’s and Sotheby’s wouldn’t touch it, and you could only fetch a fraction of its real worth on the black market. She was after the big game, the true treasure that would draw legit collectors with deep pockets.

If Aram actually had the item he’d promised—and the documentation to back it up—she might have a sale that could literally make history.

The thug ushered Erin into Aram’s office, and the small Armenian practically leapt from his desk to greet her.

“Erin! How lovely to see you again.” Natty as always in his three-piece suit, Aram rose on tiptoes to kiss her on both cheeks. “Is it my imagination or have you grown even more beautiful?”

She tolerated his embrace and smiled as if they were actually flirting. “Careful what you say! I might start to believe you.”

Her gaze strayed past him to an object on his desk about two feet tall and one foot in diameter, sheeted with a cloth of burgundy satin. The thug discreetly bowed out of the office and shut the door.

“Can I get you anything?” Aram asked, fussing over her like a *maître d’* at the Ritz. “A plate of madeleines and coffee? *Armenian* coffee—better

than Turkish!”

Erin hid her impatience. “Thanks, but I just had lunch. And I’m really excited to see the Object. What a find!”

“Of course! Of course! Wait until you see.” He motioned for her to take the chair he had carefully positioned in front of the desk.

She sat and crossed her legs, her hands steeped in front of her mouth in a pose of skeptical anticipation. With a triumphant smirk, Aram whisked the cloth off the hidden shape on the desk with the flair of a magician unveiling his greatest illusion.

It violated every bargaining strategy Erin had ever learned to betray even the slightest interest, much less amazement. Despite this, she uncrossed her legs and shifted forward, mouth open.

Roughly pyramidal in form, the thing on Aram’s desk might easily have been mistaken for a lump of slag from a foundry scrap heap. Its left side was uneven and angular, its lumpy black surface stained reddish-brown in places as if rusted. The right face looked as if had once been the same, but a wedge appeared to have been either broken off or chiseled away.

Curled like an embryo inside the exposed cavity, a far more defined form nestled within the iron shell. The figure, which would probably have stood about eighteen inches high if fully revealed, resembled some distorted crustacean. A segmented carapace akin to that of a trilobite curved up to an oversized, U-shaped head with pincer-like mandibles. Pairs of articulated legs folded fetal claws in toward its hidden underbelly. Unlike the dull, coarse surface of the material that encrusted it, the figure gleamed like polished black tourmaline. With only the left profile visible, the dome of one enormous insectile eye peered out with lidless vigilance.

It’s real, Erin thought immediately. An intense agitation like stage fright—half ecstasy, half dread—seized her, a lapse of volition that left her paralyzed and speechless.

She’d had gut feelings before about whether the items she appraised were bona fide or not, and they nearly always proved correct, but she’d never felt any as strong as this. Then again, she’d never been in the presence of a rarity like the legendary Aldon-Bennington Object. It was like viewing the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail.

“Ah!” Aram smirked. “I knew you would be impressed.”

His gloating snapped her out of her stupor, and she silently cursed herself. Her dumbstruck reaction alone had probably doubled his asking price. Now she would have to put him on the defensive, reclaim her advantage.

"It's a remarkable piece," she conceded coolly, "but what about the provenance?"

Provenance. It's what separated the worthless from the priceless—the intangible value imbued in an item by its extraordinary history. A splinter of wood by itself would be garbage, but if you proved that splinter came from the True Cross that crucified Jesus Christ or the stake that roasted Joan of Arc, it became a relic worthy of worship. Even an empty Coke can might fetch a small fortune if you verified that it had once touched the lips of Elvis Presley.

"The auction houses will want documentation," Erin said. "Without it, they'll dismiss the Object as a fraud, albeit an impressive one."

Aram grinned like a poker player who holds the winning hand everyone thinks is a bluff. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out a cardboard file box, which he pushed across the desktop toward Erin. "You will find it all there: bills of sale, photographs, estate inventories. The whole history of the Object, from the South Pole to your doorstep. And I will only charge you another two hundred thousand for it."

Erin stood and levered open the lid of the box to peek inside. On top of a stack of manila folders, she saw a handful of sepia-toned cardboard prints of parka-clad explorers silhouetted against the white expanse of a frozen waste. "And how much for the Object itself?"

"A million."

Erin choked out a laugh. "No meteorite has ever gone for that much!"

"No meteorite is like this." Aram reclined in his office chair, fat gold rings on his fat folded fingers. "When the news gets out, you'll make ten times that."

He was probably right. The Aldon-Bennington Object could probably garner twice what he was asking for it on the basis of its bizarre history alone. If the figure inside turned out to be the fossilized remains of some extraterrestrial life form, as rumor-mongers had speculated, governments around the world would bid millions to give their scientists first crack at studying it. However, if the creature were actually a sculpture crafted by an

alien intelligence billions of years before the dawn of humans . . . the amount acquirers would be willing to pay could literally be astronomical.

Slow down, girl. Don't count your aliens before they hatch.

"To get my client to pony up that kind of money, I'm going to have to vet the item personally." She never mentioned Micah by name; she didn't want to take a chance on Aram trying to contact her buyer directly and cut her out of the deal. Hitching her purse onto her shoulder, Erin stood and reached for the box of files on the desk. "May I borrow these and get back to you?"

Aram's eyes flicked to the Object, and for the first time he seemed nervous—worried, even. "For you, I have turned down many buyers, Erin," he replied, suddenly huffy. "Many! To them, I say, 'No, no, no!' But I cannot wait. If you will not make an offer, I go back to them."

Chill, girl. He's desperate to close.

"I'm sorry. I can't commit without authenticating the merchandise." Erin pivoted as if to leave.

Aram jumped from his chair. "Nine hundred thousand if you take today! And I throw in the documents."

His eagerness to cut the price had red flags waving in Erin's head. Maybe the piece was a forgery after all. Aram had never palmed off phony merchandise on her before, however, so she paused. "Let me review the provenance. If it holds up, you've got a deal."

Again, Aram glanced at the meteorite, as if to make sure it hadn't moved when he wasn't looking. "Okay, okay. I give you twenty-four hours. After that—first come, first serve!"

"Fair enough." Erin took her Smartphone from her purse and snapped a few pics of the Object from different angles and distances. "I'll be in touch."

She grabbed the box of documents from Aram's desk and headed out of the office. Before she even got to the door, Aram threw the satin cloth over the Object again, as though he couldn't bear to look at it or have it look at him.

* * *

At 3 A.M. the following morning, Erin was still poring over the scattered photos and papers at the desk in her home office. Wearing only sweat pants and a tank top, she poised a magnifying glass over a sepia cardboard print of a dazed-looking man in a fur parka and compared it with a photo of Thaddeus Bennington she'd called up on her laptop screen from his Wikipedia entry.

Did both photos actually depict the same man? If so, it was difficult to tell and even harder to believe. The gent in the Wikipedia portrait was a starch-stiff Edwardian in a high wingtip collar and tie, his face clean-shaven, his bearing self-possessed to the point of smugness. The man in the parka wore a grizzled, foot-long beard, and the sunlight reflecting off the polar ice had burnt his fair complexion to dark umber. His eyes gaped at vacancy, oblivious to the photographer and everything else.

In his arms, he cradled the Object as if it were a newborn.

Erin eyed the picture with suspicion. It had evidently been taken with a Kodak Brownie, yet she could find no record in the pertinent historical literature of that particular shot or any of the other post-expedition photographs in Aram's box. One had to be wary of all kinds of digital trickery in photographic evidence these days. The notorious German art forger Wolfgang Beltracchi once had his wife, Helene, pose as her own grandmother in a faked period photo in which his adept forgeries hung on the wall behind her.

Erin studied and compared the individual features of the man in each picture, focusing on elements of the face that were difficult to alter with makeup: the overall shape of the head, the ratio from scalp to brow and from brow to chin, the size of the eyes and their relation to the nose. She'd read that experts had been able to distinguish the real Saddam Hussein from his body doubles by the shape of his earlobes, but unfortunately, the hood of the parka covered the Bennington lookalike's ears. He *seemed* to be Thaddeus Bennington . . . but, like all the other evidence in Aram's box, the photo stopped short of giving Erin the certainty she needed.

In the annals of doomed Antarctic explorations, the Aldon-Bennington Expedition had largely been forgotten or, perhaps, deliberately ignored. Cedric Aldon and Thaddeus Bennington had launched their ill-fated enterprise in November of 1910, and their sordid demise was swiftly

overshadowed by the grand and tragic “Race to the Pole” of Amundsen and Scott the following year.

Like their fellow Englishman Scott, Aldon, Bennington, and their team set out for the Pole from a base camp on Cape Evans. Their route took them across what today is known as the Allan Hills Icefield, and along the way they discovered isolated rocks of varying sizes scattered across the ice shelf. Bennington, an avid amateur geologist, was keen to collect Antarctic mineral samples, and his journal indicates that he deduced what is now common knowledge: that these incongruous stones could not have originated from the surrounding terrain and must therefore have fallen from the sky. In later years, Allan Hills and icefields like it would yield some of the world’s rarest and most valuable meteorites, including wayward chips of the moon and Mars.

“Fabulous find today!” Bennington jotted in his notes for December 19. “The largest specimen yet. A fissure in the exterior reveals it to be hollow and to contain some sort of heterogeneous object within. Will try to get a better look at the enclosed specimen if I can do so without damage to the whole.”

Historians of the expedition declared this to be the first reference to what they dubbed the Aldon-Bennington Object. Whether Bennington found the Object on the Allan Hills ice sheet or elsewhere, they could not determine, for Bennington’s journal ceased after this entry.

The chroniclers presumed that some unforeseen disaster struck the expedition—inclement weather, a catastrophic accident—disrupting the ration of supplies crucial to the team’s survival. No one could ascertain how far the explorers had made it toward the Pole before they turned back, but they had soon killed and eaten all their sled dogs. Forced to pull their sledge themselves, Aldon, Bennington, and their three cohorts found the weight of Bennington’s mineral specimens too much to drag along in their weakened state, so they abandoned the meteorites en route.

All but one.

Erin fished another cardboard print out of Aram’s box. These photos, if genuine, must have been taken by one of the men Aldon and Bennington had left to tend the base camp while they sought the Pole. This one showed the explorers’ sledge, upon which lay a man whose parka had been torn open like the skin of a flayed animal. The ivory tusks of the man’s

barren ribs jutted above the coat's fur, chunks of gristle and sinew still clinging to the gnawed bones. The man's head lolled toward the camera, half its face chewed off. The half that remained, however, bore a strong resemblance to Cedric Aldon.

Bennington had found a novel way to sustain himself long enough to return to base camp. He and the Object were the only survivors.

When the men at the camp attempted to question Bennington about what had happened, they found him utterly unresponsive and incoherent, mumbling gibberish "as though he were speaking in tongues." Their only clues to the expedition's fate were Aldon's corpse, the journal Bennington still carried in the pocket of his parka, and the Object, which he clutched with an infantile jealousy. Bennington's condition failed to improve when he and his base camp crew were rescued and returned to Britain, and he died, delirious, thirty-three years later in the asylum at Broadmoor.

Erin thumbed up one of the snapshots she'd taken of the Object from the album on her Smartphone. She pinched and zoomed until the crabbed figure inside the meteorite swelled to fill the phone's screen. Then she placed it next to the print of Bennington with the Object and trained the lens of her magnifying glass on the dark cleft of the rock in the explorer's arms. Was that the outline of one large eye and the suggestion of a curled claw in the depths of the stone's shadows?

She moved the lens up and down, trying to sharpen the image, but the photograph's poor lighting and fuzzy focus refused further resolution. Even if these pictures from the expedition were real, she still couldn't be sure the thing on Aram's desk had been the true Aldon-Bennington Object and not a clever replica.

Groaning, Erin set the photos aside and, in desultory fashion, paged through the ownership records for the Object over the past century. Although the pile of sales receipts, bequests, and estate inventories looked as dry as a CPA's ledger, they told a tale of serial misfortune beside which the ill-omened Hope Diamond seemed like a lucky rabbit's foot.

The woe began when the Object and Bennington's few remaining personal effects passed to Constance Bennington, Thaddeus's twenty-four-year-old wife. Left destitute, with her husband a babbling lunatic, she was forced to sell the Object and virtually all their other possessions to pay the debts Thaddeus had incurred fitting out the expedition. Ostensibly "mad

with grief,” Constance committed suicide by drinking tea laced with belladonna leaves she’d harvested from the garden of her cottage, which she would have had to vacate the following week.

Each subsequent owner of the Object had suffered an unrelated yet equally unpleasant fate: the German astronomer who, during a “paroxysm of night terrors,” suffered a massive stroke that left him completely paralyzed and unable to speak for the remainder of his life; the curator who inexplicably stole the Object from her own museum’s collection, only to die in a car accident immediately after she’d sold the meteorite on the black market; the heavy-metal rock singer and dabbler in the occult who’d purchased the Object, then promptly spiraled into addiction and overdosed on heroin.

And so on and so on. In cross-referencing the previous owners’ personal histories, Erin had perversely come to consider a horrible demise confirmation that a given individual had indeed possessed the Object. One would think such a grim history would reduce the Object’s desirability, but over the years the notoriety merely added to its dark glamour.

Erin started to nod, struggling to keep her eyes open. She’d looked over every scrap in Aram’s box a dozen times, researched every clue the documents offered, yet certainty still eluded her. Ultimately, she would have to decide whether to risk her reputation and career by gambling that the Object was legit.

She’d sleep on it.

A kaleidoscopic screensaver bloomed on her laptop display as she left the office for the bedroom. Erin set her cell phone’s alarm for 7 A.M. and lay down on her bed to catnap for a few hours.

Although she’d hoped to clear her mind of work for a while, the opposite happened. She’d stared so long at the pictures of the Aldon-Bennington expedition that they infected her dreams. Erin found herself in the point of view of the camera, except that she now saw the scene as if it were an old 8mm home movie, in full color and with darting, herky-jerky movements of the lens. A fur-coated man stood shaking his head beside the sledge with Aldon’s corpse. The blood and bits of meat that coated Aldon’s ribs had darkened to a deep carmine as they froze, making the curved bones resemble clawed gouges in the backdrop of white snowdrifts. And yet, although a bitter wind whipped the living man’s parka and he appeared to

be shouting something at her, Erin heard no sound except a prolonged treble hum, as of a dial tone after a sudden disconnection or an EKG monitor that has flatlined.

The dream's camera swung to the left, where Thaddeus Bennington sat cross-legged in the snow, the Object in his lap. His lips moved, but he stared without awareness as if snow-blind. Now that Bennington was no longer sepia-toned, Erin could see that his swarthy appearance was not merely due to sunburn; freeze-dried blood caked his chin and cheeks and flecked away in black-red snowflakes.

He suddenly glared up at her, his raving eyes and bared teeth both stained red. His mouth worked furiously and the white-noise tone intensified, rising in pitch and volume, until it seemed as if Bennington himself emitted the sound. He thrust the meteorite at Erin until its gaping crevice filled her view. An ebon eye peered out at her, and the agitated motion of the scene made it appear that one small claw had twitched loose and scissored open . . .

The high-pitched hum phased into the twitter of Erin's cell phone ringtone.

She moaned and rolled over to grab the phone from her nightstand. The screen said it was Aram on the line. Had she overslept? No, the phone's clock said it was barely a quarter past six. What the hell was he doing calling so early?

Erin tried to clear the morning phlegm from her throat before answering. "Hello?"

"Are you ready to make a bid?" Aram asked, skipping the perfunctory pleasantries. "I need to know."

His voice sounded as hoarse and fuzzed with sleep as hers, and for a moment, she had the crazy impression he'd awakened from the same dream she had. She was tempted to ask him if that were true, then thought better of it.

"I'm still preparing the recommendation for my client. I have to call and confer with him later, *during business hours*," she said, stressing her annoyance.

"I need to know," Aram repeated. "I—I have another buyer."

Another buyer? Since 3 P.M. yesterday? Give me a break! Erin thought. "I should have an answer for you by ten."

Aram didn't respond, and Erin wondered if her phone had dropped the call.

"Commit now, and I can do a half-million," he said at last. "But you have to take delivery today."

Under ordinary circumstances, such a steep cut in price so early in the negotiations would have sent Erin running for the exit. Something was definitely wrong, and Aram wanted to unload the Object as quickly as possible.

In this case, though, the drop in price triggered an entirely different instinct: to cut out Micah, her client, and buy the Object herself.

The idea seemed mad on the face of it, but she felt more strongly than ever that the meteorite was the true Aldon-Bennington Object. Erin had already confirmed that Aram had purchased the item legitimately in an estate sale, so she didn't have to worry that she might be receiving stolen property. Why should she settle for a paltry commission of a couple hundred grand when she might easily compound her investment tenfold at auction?

"I'll need a few hours to line up financing," she told Aram. "But have it packed and ready to go."

* * *

Erin had done well for herself considering that she was only thirty-two, but coming up with half a million dollars on short notice strained even her impressive resources. There was no time to get another mortgage on her condo, so she had to wire-transfer funds out of her retirement accounts, which was going to hurt at tax-time. But she planned to have plenty of money to pay the early-withdrawal penalties by then.

After a triple espresso to clear her head, she swung by the bank and got a cashier's check for the full amount on her way back to Aram's warehouse. The same thug met her at the door when she got there. Apparently, she and Aram weren't the only ones who'd failed to get much sleep that night, for the goon seemed out of it. Erin couldn't see his eyes behind his wraparound shades, but the big man's head was angled away from her as she

entered, looking past her, and his lips mumbled silent words as if he were reciting lines to memorize.

When they got to the office, Aram did not rise to greet her but remained tilted back in his chair, eyes shut, one ring-studded hand on his forehead. On the desk before him rested an oblong cardboard box a little over two feet long.

Erin approached the desk. "May I check the merchandise?"

Aram's eyes rolled open, and he seemed startled to find her there. "Hmm? Oh . . . sure, sure."

She lifted the lid of the box and saw it was nearly filled with green Styrofoam peanuts. Erin brushed a few aside and uncovered a lumpy ridge of the meteorite hidden like a reef beneath ocean waves.

"As we agreed." She took the check from her purse and laid it in front of Aram.

"Sure, sure." He waved her off without bothering to look at the amount. "Vaughn can help you take it out."

Erin closed the box and folded its flaps in to keep it shut. Vaughn, the ox, carried it to her car.

"Appreciate it," she said as he placed the box in her trunk.

His lips moved, and Erin could hear the hiss and puff of shaped air, but the words were still inaudible. Without so much as nodding at her, Vaughn headed back into the warehouse, his hand dipping into the breast pocket of his blazer as he left.

* * *

When she got the thing home, Erin wished she'd brought Vaughn with her to carry it into the condo, for the box weighed as much or more than one of the 45-pound plates she used on the squat machine at her gym. She lugged the carton inside, hoping she wouldn't slip a disc in her lower back, and set it on the coffee table in her den.

Erin levered the Object out of the open box, Styrofoam peanuts avalanching onto the table as she set the meteorite upright. The buzz of morning java and deal-making adrenalin wore off, and she felt a sinking nausea of unease.

I put my life savings into this. She plucked a few green puffs of Styrofoam out of the stone's cavity. *I must have been out of my mind.*

Uncovered, the eye of the inside figure caught the light from the gooseneck lamp she trained on it and appeared darkly translucent—a clouded opal. Recalling her dream, Erin poked her index finger toward the figure's claw but feared it might snap at her. When she forced herself to make contact with the etched appendage, she laughed at her silly skittishness. The claw was still immobile, of course, fused to the figure's side.

It *had* to be real. If scientists could prove that other meteorites came from Mars, there ought to be a way to find out for certain where this one originated.

Sylvie!

Erin hadn't thought of her freshman year roommate since they'd chatted awkwardly at their ten-year class reunion. Even at college, they'd led separate lives—Erin an outgoing campus activist and party girl, Sylvia a cloistered academic. With Sylvie in P-Chem and Erin in Art History, they barely saw each other except when it came to study or sleep. But Erin couldn't think of anyone else she knew offhand who could help her analyze the chemical composition of a meteorite.

Energized, Erin got online and combed the social networks. It took awhile because she couldn't remember Sylvie's husband's surname. Fortunately, Sylvie had become a hyphenate: Sylvia Nuñez-Stamberg.

Hey, roomie! Erin typed in the message that accompanied her friend request. *How goes it? Look, I was wondering if I could ask a little favor . . .*

With the note sent, she called Micah to give him the bad news. "Yeah, the Aldon-Bennington thing looked sketchy so I passed on it," she told her would-be client, holding the cell phone with one hand as she stroked the Object with the other. "I didn't want you to get burned."

* * *

Erin spent much of that day at her desk, sifting aimlessly through the documentation while waiting for Sylvie to reply. An attention-deficit

personality, she left a television on as background noise and glanced up every so often to absorb sound bites from the daytime talk shows.

Possibly due to her lack of sleep and suppressed stress, a piercing headache caused her vision to shimmer and her ears to ring. Erin hoped she wasn't getting a migraine. She leaned back in her chair, eyes shut, head propped on one hand, and waited for it to pass.

The ringing in her ears thrummed like the carrier wave for a radio transmission. Erin could almost make out an intelligible signal that pulsed beneath the tone, and she pictured Vaughn's lips speaking unheard words that were lost beneath the wavering tone . . .

Erin's laptop chimed. She jerked forward and shook her right arm, which had gone numb. The office had gone dark but for the radiant blueness of television and computer screens.

On the laptop display was an email notification informing her that Sylvie had accepted her friend request.

Only after Erin read the post did the background chatter from the television filter into her consciousness. The local evening news was on: something about a shooting. Murder-suicide, an apparent robbery gone wrong. Erin swiveled toward the TV, saw a correspondent standing in front of what looked like Aram's warehouse. Then the anchorwoman threw it over to the weatherman, who predicted sunny skies and highs in the 80s for the following day.

* * *

As Erin had hoped, Sylvie was enough of a science geek that she couldn't resist the opportunity to see a scrap of outer space. She currently taught chemistry at a community college in the Valley while working on her doctoral dissertation, so she arranged to drop by Erin's condo after that evening's classes.

Erin tried to take a much-needed nap while she was waiting, yet she hardly slept. The whole thing about Aram weirded her out, but she convinced herself it was just another freak coincidence, like all those others she'd read about in the history of the Object. Erin had known that goon Vaughn was bad news the first time she'd laid eyes on him, and he'd

probably been planning to bump off Aram for months. The incident didn't signify any more than the spurious curse of King Tut's tomb, and now was no time to get superstitious. Still, the thought of it kept her awake every time she lay down, so she applied extra foundation around her eyes to hide the bags and dark circles before Sylvie arrived.

Motherhood had plumped her former roommate, who was shorter and squatter than Erin, but Sylvie's black hair and creamy copper complexion remained the same as when they'd been freshmen. She wore a green flannel hoodie with her school's mascot, a smiling cricket, on the front, and carried a large canvas book bag on her shoulder. They exchanged the clumsy hug of friends who have become strangers, and Erin led her to the living room coffee table.

As Erin switched on the desk lamp, Sylvie squatted beside the Object for a closer look. "Cool! How much you think it's worth?"

"Depends on what you can tell me." Erin wasn't about to let on that she'd plunked down five hundred grand for it. "Is there a way to make sure it's a real meteorite and not some kid's metal-shop project?"

"Say no more! I came prepared." Sylvie slipped the bag off her shoulder and took out a rubber glove, a white rag, and a plastic bottle of yellowish fluid.

When Sylvie put on the protective glove and doused the cloth with the liquid, Erin got nervous. "Whoa! You're not gonna wreck it, are you?"

"Not unless cleaning will ruin it. This is just a weak nitric acid solution." Sylvie indicated a relatively smooth inside lip of the Object's cavity. "It looks like someone sawed the thing open, so we may get a decent cross-section here."

She rubbed the damp rag along the flat edge, and black tarnish dissolved to reveal a dense, silvery network of intersecting diagonal lines that reminded Erin of the integrated circuits on a silicon chip.

Sylvie grinned. "*Et voilà!* They call this a Widmanstätten pattern. Nickel-iron crystals like this only form in zero gee and can't be replicated in the laboratory. Congratulations: you got a real space rock."

Erin's tension should have eased, yet her apprehension only sharpened. At least the outer crust was genuine. But what if some enterprising hoaxer had obtained an actual meteorite, hollowed it out, and placed a phony figurine inside to inflate its value?

“You said it looked as if someone cut it open,” she mused. “Can you tell if that thing inside was part of the original specimen?”

Sylvie screwed her mouth to one side in doubt. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve heard of so-called ‘zoomorphic’ meteorites that are vaguely shaped like a bird’s head or whatever, but nothing like *this*.”

Erin flinched as Sylvie traced the chiseled details of the creature’s jointed limbs with her fingertip.

Sylvie shook her head and moistened the rag with acid again. “Worth a try.”

She burnished the figure’s eye, but the acid had no effect except, perhaps, to make the orb appear even more lustrous.

“Well, it’s not a meteorite,” Sylvie concluded. “Hard to tell *what* it’s made of.”

Erin sank onto the sofa and pressed her palms into the hollows of her eyes, smearing her meticulous makeup. So the “Object” was nothing but a fake after all. Unless . . .

“Wait, wait.” She lifted her head. “Isn’t there some way to tell if that bug-thing came from somewhere other than Earth? The way they did with those rocks from the moon and Mars.”

Sylvie smiled. “Oh, yeah! Chemical composition—it’s like a planet’s fingerprint. If the relative quantities of the elements in a sample are different from those naturally occurring in rocks on Earth, you know it’s not from around here.”

Erin stood, rising along with her hope. “Can you do that?”

Sylvie sucked on a strand of her hair, as she used to when doing her calculus homework. “I suppose I could do a spectroscopic analysis in the school’s lab. I’d need a sample to take with me, though.”

Erin’s gaze flicked to the Object, fretful. “I don’t want to wreck it.”

“I only need a tiny piece. You’ll never even know it’s gone.” Sylvie dug into her bag again and took out some fearsome-looking power tools. “I brought these along in case I needed to cut a cross-section for the acid etching.”

She plugged an extension cord into a wall socket and knelt beside the meteorite with a small, diamond-edged rotary saw that resembled a demonic dental instrument. Erin cringed as the saw blade whined, then

slurred to a halt as Sylvie lowered it onto an inconspicuous ridge of the figurine's carapace.

"Damn it!" Sylvie switched off the tool and examined the blade. About the circumference of a fifty-cent piece, the steel circle was bent and had an ugly gouge in its rim.

The figurine didn't have a nick on it.

Sylvie ruined two more saw blades before giving up on that approach. Finally, she took a pair of needle-nosed pliers and, through brute force, managed to snap a pinhead-sized chip off the creature's shell.

Erin inspected the speck dubiously. "Is that enough?"

"Yeah. When heated, it should give me a decent emission spectrum. I'll take it to work with me tomorrow." Sylvie placed the chip in an empty compartment of her contact lens case for safekeeping.

Erin clung to the possibility, however slim, that the figurine might still be genuine. "I so appreciate this, Syl," she said, giving her former roomie a more sincere hug. "Maybe I'll get a decent night's sleep tonight."

But she didn't.

* * *

Erin found herself on a craggy promontory beneath a cavernous night sky. At least, it seemed to be night, for the sky was blacker than she'd ever seen it, as if there were no atmosphere to soften the void. The stars were out—*too many* stars that were too large and too close together. She could find no Big Dipper, no Orion, nor any other semblance of order in the celestial blizzard. The orbs blazed blue rather than white, filling the heavens with a light unbearable to look upon and scorching the cracked soil of the plain beneath Erin with azure incandescence.

The intensity of the glare seared her, and she wanted to avert her eyes. But her eyes had no lids to shut, and she feared casting her gaze downward. Her body felt wrong—she couldn't feel her arms—or she felt too many arms. She didn't want to see herself.

And the noise: a chorus of static hisses that fused into a single cosmic shriek, as if Erin's head had become a radio telescope array attuned to each

of those billions of stars. The universe funneled into her until she thought her mind would either collapse or explode—black hole or supernova.

Erin gagged, unable to cry out in the airless vacuum that surrounded her. The starlight brightened until the sky blurred into a single, intolerable glare of bright blue. Then the scene before her refocused, and she found herself peering out the windshield of a moving car traveling down a two-lane highway on a cloudless, sunny Southern California afternoon.

Because her lidless eyes never blinked, Erin assumed this dislocating transition was part of the same bizarre nightmare. Only when she veered into the left-hand lane and heard the frantic honking of the oncoming pickup truck did she accept that she had somehow dropped into a reality that was already in progress.

Erin blinked—she had eyelids again—and discovered that her own hands were on the steering wheel, that her own foot was on the accelerator. Panicked, she spun the wheel to the right and slammed on the brake so abruptly that her Lexus fishtailed and nearly spun out.

The pickup swerved around her car's rear end, horn sneering. Erin skidded to halt on the brush-covered shoulder and killed the engine. She hunched over the steering wheel, gasping, then sagged back in the driver's seat and shut her eyes.

She instantly thought better of it and snapped bolt upright, opening her eyes wide to make sure she didn't doze off. It was bad enough that she'd nearly had a head-on collision. What really freaked her out was that she had no idea how she got here.

She glanced down at the black tank top and strategically torn jeans she wore. Not as shocking as seeing extra arms on her body, but also not the teddy she'd worn to bed last night. To her knowledge, she had never sleepwalked before and had never blacked out even in her wildest party-girl drinking days. Yet she had no memory of rising from her bed, changing clothes, getting in her car, or driving to . . . where the hell was she?

The low hills of a ravine flanked the road on either side, with higher peaks visible in the distance, all covered in scrub brush and shrub growth browned by years of drought. It looked like any number of undeveloped areas in the Valley, but it was not one she recognized.

Her cell phone bleated, and Erin jumped. She looked at the passenger seat and saw that, despite somnambulating, she'd had enough presence of

mind to bring her purse. She grabbed the phone and thumbed its screen. “Yeah?”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Sylvie, sounding abashed. “Is this a bad time?”

“Yeah, kinda.” Considering that she might have early-onset Alzheimer’s, Erin thought the Object was the least of her worries right now. “What’s up?” she asked.

“Didn’t mean to bother you, but I so couldn’t resist!” Sylvie’s voice burst with geek enthusiasm. “I had a chance to test that sample I took and . . . I’m sorry, but you’ve gotta see this! Any chance you can drop by the college soon?”

“Sure. I’m in the area anyway,” Erin replied, although she still had no idea what area she was in. “I could use some good news.”

“Oh, man—just wait! You’re gonna *die*!”

I hope not, Erin thought as Sylvie hung up.

* * *

By consulting her GPS, Erin located herself as being in the hills outside Glendale, so she really wasn’t that far from Sylvie’s school. She cranked up the radio and mumbled along with the songs as she drove to keep herself conscious and connected with the waking world during the forty-minute drive to the community college.

The state-funded campus was a meager facility; Sylvie’s “lab” looked more like a high-school home-ec classroom with black granite countertops and ceramic basins. In addition to beakers and Bunsen burners, however, it did have some sophisticated equipment for chemical analysis, including a spectrometer.

“Glad you could make it.” This time, Sylvie hugged her as if they really were best friends. “Thank you so much for thinking of me to test your meteorite. Can’t wait to show you!”

She wore a white lab coat “for looks,” but shed it as she led Erin into her tiny office. “It’s what the kids expect,” she explained. “Hey . . . you okay?”

Sylvie gave her a concerned look. Though Erin had touched up her makeup, she evidently hadn’t applied enough foundation to erase the worry

in her expression.

She gave a tired smile. “Yeah. Too much caffeine. So . . . don’t keep me in suspense!”

“Oh. Right!” Sylvie beamed and jiggled the mouse of the computer on her desk until her *Doctor Who* screensaver disappeared. The computer monitor displayed two horizontal rainbow-hued strips: the top one shaded, uninterrupted, from violet to red; the bottom one looked as if someone had snipped the top band into scores of thin, glowing, varicolored lines separated by black gaps.

“This, of course, is the spectrum of so-called ‘white light’ that’s our baseline for comparison,” Sylvie said, indicating the continuous band of color. “The one below it is the emission spectrum generated by the light given off by the meteorite sample when I heated it.

“Each chemical element emits photons of certain frequencies. They produce a unique pattern of Fraunhofer lines.” She pointed to the vertical slivers of color. “By seeing what pattern of lines a composite material produces, we can tell which elements it contains.”

Erin squinted at the alternating slits of dark and light; they reminded her of the dots and dashes of Morse code—a communiqué to decipher. “And you found something unusual?”

“Well, since it came from a meteorite, I eliminated all the usual suspects—iron, nickel, oxygen, hydrogen, yada, yada, yada. And I was left with *this*.” Sylvie clicked a mouse button. More than half the Fraunhofer lines vanished, but dozens still remained. She grinned in triumph.

Erin didn’t get it. “What’s that?”

“Something that doesn’t exist in our solar system. Element 120, also known as unbinilium. It’s the first of the heavy elements in the hypothetical ‘island of stability’ on the periodic table— big atoms that won’t just fall apart through radioactive decay.” Sylvie mistook Erin’s dumbstruck silence for incomprehension. “An *undiscovered element*! How frickin’ cool is that? We’re talking Nobel Prize here!”

“This stuff . . . where did it come from?” Erin asked.

“Gosh, I don’t know.” Sylvie contemplated the spectrum onscreen. “They think the heavier elements form in the cores of collapsing stars, but nothing like this exists in Nature anywhere near us. We can’t even create it with a supercollider, and it would take a star way bigger than the sun to

have enough mass to crush together enough protons and neutrons to make this big a nucleus—maybe even a quasar.”

“Quasar?”

“Quasi-stellar radio source. Not technically a star, but a huge, incredibly bright celestial object. But the only quasars we can see are billions of light-years away, which means they probably haven’t existed since the universe was young.”

Erin sank into a plastic-seated chair adjacent to Sylvie’s desk. *When the universe was young, and the stars were new and blue and thick as flakes in a snowstorm, before red-shifted repulsion threw them apart into an ever-expanding void . . .*

Erin grabbed her head, which seemed to buzz with interstellar interference.

She should have been ecstatic. If these results were confirmed, the Object would easily be worth a thousand times what she paid for it.

Instead, it felt as if she’d failed to wake from her latest nightmare after all—or, rather, that her nightmare was bleeding out of her brain to infect the real world.

A hideous suspicion ignited within her. “Syl, could that figure—the one inside the meteorite—be some kind of *probe* sent here to study our planet?”

Sylvie actually laughed at that. “Not unless whoever sent it wanted to wait forever to find out about us. You can’t send a radio signal faster than the speed of light. It takes about thirteen minutes for a transmission just to reach our probes on Mars. Can you imagine how long it would take to get across the whole universe?”

Erin ran her hands through her hair as if to comb the tangles from her thoughts. “I know, I know! But there must be some way of communicating instantaneously. Remember, we’re talking about a super-advanced civilization here.”

“Well . . .” Sylvie sucked on a strand of her hair for a moment. “Okay, if you want to get really *Star Trek* about it, there might be a way to communicate instantaneously, but—”

“How?”

Sylvie sighed. “There’s a thing in quantum physics called ‘spooky action at a distance.’ In certain cases, two subatomic particles that come in contact with each other continue to affect each other’s movement no

matter how far apart they subsequently become.” She touched the fingertips of both hands together, then swept her right hand out as if casting a quark into space. “Theoretically, if you had a communicator with one of those two particles and I had one with the other, we could stand at opposite ends of the universe and still send a binary signal back-and-forth instantly simply by moving the particles.

“Even assuming that was possible, though, who would sit around billions of years waiting for the phone to ring?”

“I don’t know.” Erin hung her head. “I really don’t.”

* * *

Crazy talk, she thought as she drove home that evening. *You keep saying that stuff, they’ll lock you up. Just like Bennington.*

Maybe she *was* going nuts. Sylvie had certainly given her a strange look, although she had to admit the Object’s figurine certainly appeared to have been crafted by some alien intelligence. When she asked why Erin thought it might be a probe, though, Erin couldn’t tell her about the dreams or about the awful hypothesis she was now forming. It sounded certifiably insane even to her.

Except it made perfect sense. Countless little advance scouts, scattered to the intergalactic wastes like dandelion seeds, seeking new worlds on which to plant themselves. Rather than sending out slow, cumbersome spaceships to transport the clumsy bulk of corporeal bodies across the void, how much more efficient it was to send a small receiver capable of transmitting one’s *mind* immediately to its impossibly distant destination.

And what of the race that was capable of such ingenuity? If they still existed—if they were still out there monitoring all their little probes—how much more had they evolved and advanced in the eons since the universe was young?

Erin did not want to find out.

She left her car at the curb as she pulled up in front of her condo. When she flicked on the desk lamp in the living room to illuminate the Object, the bulbous orb that peered out at her reminded Erin of the fisheye

lens of a closed-circuit security camera. Were they watching her right now, in real time, from unimaginable worlds at inconceivable distances?

She would fix that.

Erin went and yanked the comforter off her bed and rolled the Object up in it so the eye could no longer look at her. She lugged the bundle out to her car and threw it in the back seat, then went back inside to grab the claw hammer she'd used to hang the Monet prints in her office.

Without giving herself time to regret the half-million dollars she was about to throw away, Erin got back in her car and sped out of town. She would do what Aram should have done, what Thaddeus Bennington should have done, what *all* her predecessors should have done. She'd bury it where no one would ever find it. She didn't own a shovel, but she could break up the soil with the hammer's claw and dig out a hole with her hands.

Night had descended, and traffic on the freeways had begun to lighten as Erin drove away from the suburbs and into the hills. With no definite destination in mind, she didn't care where she ended up as long as it was unpopulated and remote. She hadn't had any food or coffee all day, and her head buzzed with a droning, fuzzy mosquito whine. But eating could wait.

Choosing a turnoff almost at random, she ascended a curving, two-lane highway until she could no longer see the glaring lines of traffic on the freeway or the glowing enclaves of strip malls and tract homes. At the first turnout she came to, Erin pulled over.

Nothing about the spot struck her as unusual when she first got out of the car. Often invisible due to the permanent haze of smog and the overpowering ambient electric light of Los Angeles, a speckling of stars shone in the moonless night sky. Other than the road itself, the only nearby sign of civilization was a cell phone tower atop a low rise on the right.

As she glanced around at the shaggy silhouettes of the shrub-covered landscape around her, a creeping sense of *déjà vu* set in. Despite how different the place looked in the dark, she finally recognized it as the road she'd found herself driving along when she'd awakened that afternoon.

The fact that some subconscious impulse had brought her back here made her flesh crawl. Had she been sleepwalking again without realizing it?

Erin shook off the dread. It hardly mattered which patch of dirt she shoved the damned thing in as long as she was rid of it.

The dome light came on when she opened the rear door of her car, and a black oval, quick as a cockroach, scuttled out of the bundle on the backseat and leapt into the brush at her feet.

Erin's face went cold as the blood drained from it. She snatched up the rumpled bedspread and shook it. Three chunks of the meteorite's fractured husk tumbled onto the leather upholstery. The figurine inside was gone.

Erin heard a rustling among the shrubs that bordered the road, and she stumbled into the undergrowth to follow it. With the tiny LED flashlight attached to her key ring, she managed to spotlight a scrabbling, ridge-backed arthropod that resembled a giant trilobite or horseshoe crab, but its many legs propelled it back under cover of the vegetation.

Erin saw the leaves and grass ahead of her quiver, leading in a beeline to the cell phone tower. Only then did she comprehend that the thing had used her to bring it here, just as surely as it had used Thaddeus Bennington to drag it out of the polar wastes. Just as it had maneuvered all its human pawns to move and protect it until the moment was right. And, really, for a species that had existed since the dawn of time, what was a delay of another century or so?

Long enough for a primitive Earth species to develop a telecommunications network capable of broadcasting a signal around the planet.

Erin reached the base of the triangular tower too late to stop the crab-thing from scurrying up one of the long spars of the structure's lattice frame. The thing's pincers ticked against the metal as it climbed until it attained the pinnacle, where rows of white rectangular, vertical antennae relayed cell phone transmissions from tower to tower. The crab-thing clamped onto the array with the parasitic tenacity of a tick.

In the hills around Erin, coyotes howled as if in agony. She dropped to her knees, clawing at her head as the stars screamed at her.

And as the call came from across inexpressible gulfs of time and space, the Aldon-Bennington Object provided the final proof of its indisputable authenticity.

The Well

D. L. MYERS

D. L. Myers is a weird poet in the tradition of H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard. His work has appeared in Spectral Realms, Halloween Howlings, and K. A. Opperman's The Crimson Tome. He dwells among the mist-shrouded hills and farms of the Skagit valley in the Pacific Northwest.

1

APRIL 14, 1921

*A long and grueling search of many weeks
Had I endured before the house was mine,
The thing that captured me at first a fine
Old well that stood before its gable peaks.
Of basalt bricks and ebon wood, it stood
Between the house and dark and silent trees
That strangely swayed and shook before the breeze
As if they yearned to stroke its dusky wood.*

*I also felt a yearning stir my soul;
A whisper faint and cryptic called to me
Across the endless, shadowed sea of years,
And I may never of its voice be free.
An air of vast and ancient things sublime
About it hung—this thing untouched by time.*

2

APRIL 21, 1921

*Today, down in the cellar, footing stones
Of countless other structures were revealed,
Each stacked upon the other all concealed,
Beneath a coat of clay inlaid with bones*

*Of birds and beasts, arranged into strange signs.
How many there may be, I do not know,
Or how far under earthen floor they go
Into what lightless depths or hidden mines.*

*I feel that I am like those stones a part
Of something old and hidden in the earth.
It frightens me and yet allures me too,
This thing unknown that feels about to birth.
What strange, sweet spell sings to me in my sleep?
I fear it calls from someplace dark and deep.*

3

MAY 30, 1921

*My sleep is filled with nightmares foul and black,
Of things half seen or heard in echoes lost,
And I begin to wonder at what cost
To body, soul, and mind these terrors track.
And always I look down into the well
To see a sable, swirling void instead
Of blue and cloudless sky above my head.
Dark dreams of grim foreboding I can't quell.*

*So, robbed of peaceful sleep, I pass my days
In silent dread of what the night may bring,
What visions strange and vile the wind may sing
In whispers through the trees all lost in haze.
This place begins to feel as if it's cursed;
I fear the dam of doom has yet to burst.*

4

JUNE 19, 1921

*This morning in the glowing light of dawn
I found that I had sleepwalked in the night;
I stood before the well aghast and chilled.
A dim-remembered dream filled me with fright—
I saw my face reflected in the well,
A pale and haggard mask of deathly white,
Afloat upon a sea of blinking eyes
That moiled and glimmered in my reeling sight!*

*Has madness reached into my fevered mind
And left these strange impressions and dark signs—
Or are these things like wind among the pines,
Unseen but sensed in motions all aligned?
I fear that I am lost to savage fate;
For me it is already much too late.*

5

JULY 27, 1921

*The voices came in the oppressive heat
Of midnight's gloom, and then I shrank within,
My skin too terrorstruck by the dire din
To even tremble. Darkness swelled and beat
Its blackness round me like a winding sheet
In which I could not breathe nor move nor think.
They were a thousand mortal sounds in sync
That swarmed in waves like frenzied bats and beat*

*Upon my mind a summons fierce and bleak,
Commanding me to climb into the well!
My mind was ever fixed on its black maw;
The voices said there I was meant to dwell.*

*As dwellers of the past, I would go far
Into the haunted, darkling voids bizarre.*

6

AUGUST 1, 1921

*The former tenants of this place still live
Below the well's serene, black liquid skin,
Beyond our bright demesne in tracts akin
To ebon gulfs where shapeless things outlive
All life upon this crowded, frantic plane.
Their voices called for me throughout the night,
With darkling words that seared my soul with fright,
To follow them to shadow-worlds arcane.*

*Today I go to sable spheres unknown,
To realms of being vast and violet-stained,
That lie beyond our meager minds constrained
By life within this puny sentient zone.
The well's a door to realms sensed but unseen;
I journey now to where black wings careen.*

ABOUT THE EDITOR

S. T. Joshi is the author of *The Weird Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1990), *The Modern Weird Tale* (McFarland, 2001), *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction* (PS Publishing, 2012), and other critical and biographical studies. His award-winning biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, 1996), has been expanded and updated as *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (Hippocampus Press, 2010). He has edited Lovecraft's stories, essays, letters, and revisions, as well as works by Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, and other writers.

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